

GUARDIAN



Where Have Its Creators Gone?

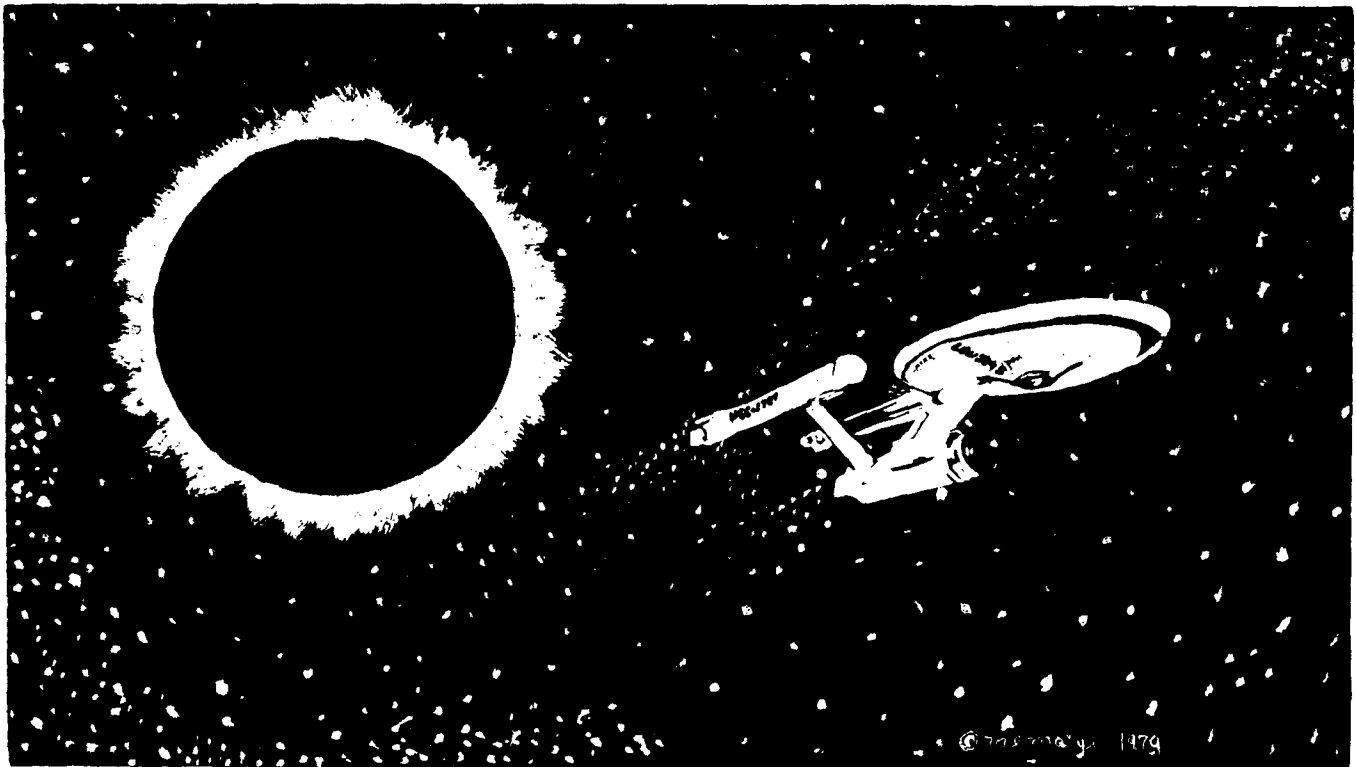
The end is upon us -- the fault is mine.
Hark ye to this warning -- avoid all
Entanglements with time.

Great good I thought to bring my people;
Unknowingly my creation became the means of our destruction.
A knowledge of the future and the
Realization that the past can be changed
Doth lead only to the temptation to play God. We were
Infants playing with forces beyond our control -- fools --
And now nothing will remain.
Nothing but the creation and this warning: BEWARE THE TIME TRAP!

Frances Zawacky

DEDICATION

This zine is respectfully dedicated to Neil Armstrong,
"Buzz" Aldrin, and Michael Collins on the 10th anniversary
of their landing on the moon.



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GUARDIAN

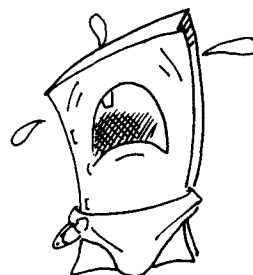
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Issue #2

September, 1979

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Bacover -- Cecilia Cosentini



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Calligraphy on pages 118, 119 by
Allyson Whitfield.
Photograph between pages 42 & 43 taken
by Cynthia Levine.

Printed by Lynbrook Graphics
GUARDIAN 2 is available from either:

Linda Deneroff
1800 Ocean Parkway, #E-6
Brooklyn, New York 11223

OR

Cynthia Levine
1805 Highway 101 North
Wayzata, Minnesota 55391

FOR:

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MAZELTOUGH PRESS

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EDITORIAL

It's that time again...and I am (for once) at a loss for words. So much has happened within the past year that I'm not sure what to say...but I'll make a stab at it.

I again must first thank all our contributors...you've come through with flying colors -- again. Also, Cargill and CBS; they should only know how much they have helped.

The biggest event in my life this past year occurred in May: my company announced that they were moving my department to company headquarters -- in Minneapolis. I was asked to make the move with them, and I accepted. Therefore, by the time you have this in your hands, I will be in Minneapolis. Of course, Cargill picked the right time for the move: just as this is going to the printer. I, therefore, must give my extra special thank-you to Linda; without her, this issue would never have made it. She has done the bulk of the work on this issue: most of the typing, all the lettering, the proofing (with the help of others who got dragged into it, whether they liked it or not), the mailing, distribution, and all the traveling involved in getting this to and from the printer.

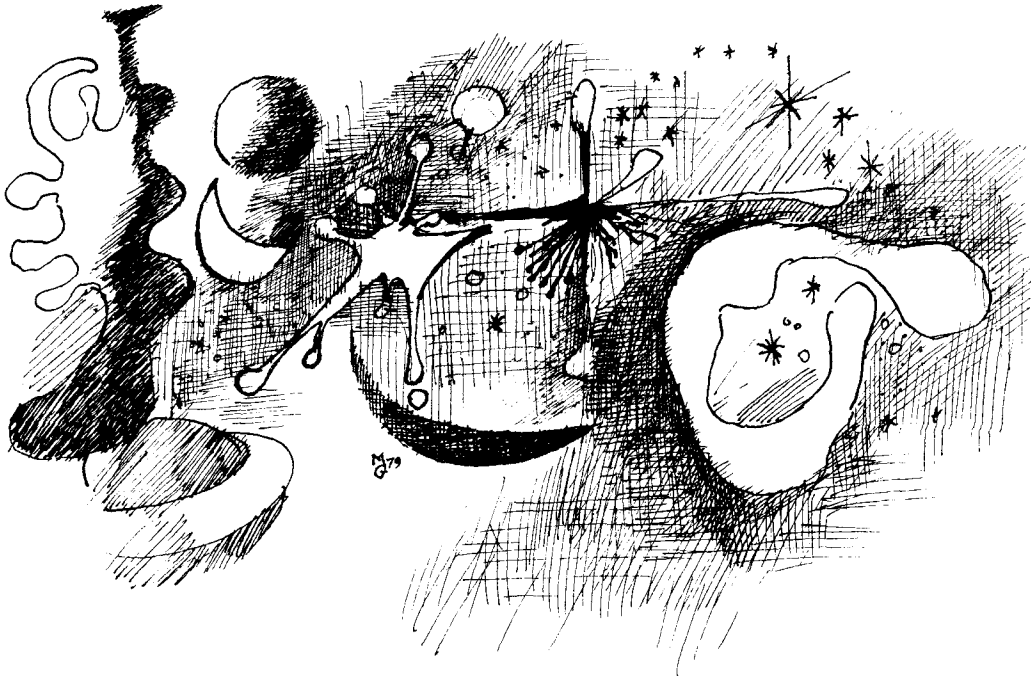
Linda, God bless you forever.

Now, even though we are almost at opposite ends of the country, *Guardian* will continue. We are going to attempt this long distance. We may be sorry, but we both enjoy this so much -- not only the pleasure we derive from doing it, but the pleasure we derive from hearing how much you readers enjoy what we have accomplished. The hassles involved in producing something like this long distance are well worth it when we find out how much you have appreciated it.

So, until next year, from the wilds of Minnesota,

LL&P,

Cynthia



EDITORIAL

Space, the final frontier... I have just finished watching/reliving the first moonwalk, presented as a news special on a rival network. It's been ten years since Man took those first steps on the moon; Skylab has since fallen into the ocean, and the space shuttle still has some problems to be solved. It's sad to realise that most people have become blasé about space, or write it off as a waste. Seeing Neil Armstrong and hearing the words, "One small step for man; one giant leap for Mankind" filled me with sadness for a space programme that has been emasculated by narrow-minded politicians who see nothing in it for their constituents.

And yet the dream lives on. You are holding it in your hands. But we must do something more. It's fine to write stories and watch movies and discuss them with people who feel the same as you do, but if we don't write Congress, write NASA, show them how we feel, the dream will die.

There's so much more to say, but if I'm to get this editorial finished and the zine to the printer, I'd better save it. Forgive me if the rest of this editorial is slightly incoherent, but I've still got to do paste-ups and layout, and I have only two more days.

Once again, we're later than we thought we'd be. I moved in April, and that set us back; and Cynthia is moving the end of this week. Plus, we received so many wonderful contributions, and didn't want to say no to any of them. Thus, this issue is over 200 pages.

This time round, we have four stories in three different series! In the Star Trek universe, we have one of Jean Stevenson's and Pat Nolan's Tales of Dharien'g't. We are pleased to present "Socratic Dialogue" by Jean Stevenson; it's a unique look at the hows and whys of Spock's decision to enter Starfleet. Jean and Pat are hard at work at more stories in this series.

In the Star Wars universe, Anne Elizabeth Zeek and Barbara Wenk are represented in these pages with the first story in their Cycle of Fire series. It's called "Aries Rising" and it's the start of a different look at our heroes. The rest of the series will be published early next year in *Time Warp*. SASE to ISIS Press; PO Box 296; Staten Island, New York 10301.

Also in the Star Wars universe is the Thousand Worlds Chronicles. We have two offerings in this series: "The Reluctant Rebel" by Maggie Nowakowska is the story of a decision forced by circumstances. "Phantoms of Shadow" by Dyane Kirkland is an interesting, never before seen, view of Darth Vader.

Lest you believe that we're just running series and cycles herein, let me mention Jacqueline Bielowicz' "In Defeat of Hell", Rayelle Roe's "The Strange Case of the Body on the Bed", and Sandy Hall's "Rite of Passage". All three stories are guaranteed to tickle your funny bone.

And on the serious side, we have Rebecca Ross' "Medical Emergency", Ginna La Croix's "Safe Haven", Ann Popplestone's and Cheryl Frashure's "House Call", and Cheryl Rice's "Memento Mori" and "Night Wine".

And that's not all! So take your time, find a comfortable chair, and settle in for a long and enjoyable read.

Thank-yous are in order before you turn the page, however. Thank you one and all to our contributors. It's your zine; Cynthia and I just do the dirty work. A thank-you to Anne Elizabeth Zeek for some typing and proof-reading. A thank-you to Martynn for coming through under short notice with some beautiful illos. A thank-you to Pat O'Neill and Frances Zawacky for proof-reading, and one to Jean Stevenson for both proof-reading and babysitting. A special thank-you to Regina Gottesman for letting me bitch in her ear when the going got rough, and one to Allyson Whitfield for her gorgeous calligraphy. And of course a thank you to Cynthia for letting me scream about margins without getting too upset, as well as mucho other reasons.

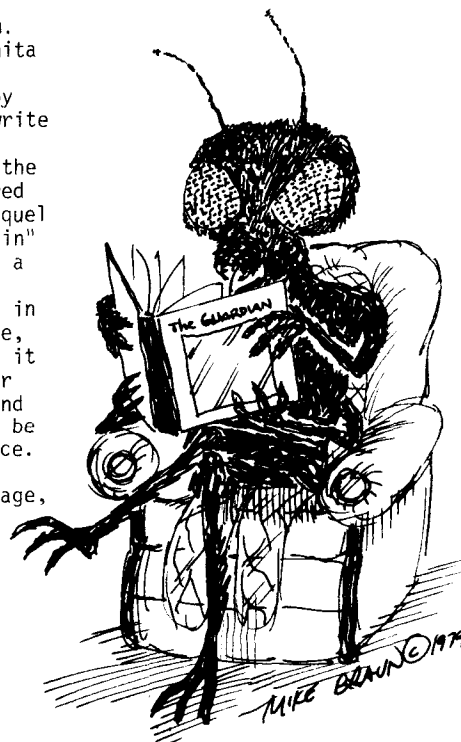
Some final business. As Cynthia has already mentioned, we are planning to do a third issue. What we have decided to do is split the editing and publishing. Therefore, all contributions are to come to me; all SASEs are to go to Cynthia. Got that? We have not set a time for the third issue (after all, look how late we are with this one), but we would like first draughts withing the next couple of months so we can start getting our act together once more.

One last item. Elan Litt and Juanita Salicrup have been given permission by Trinetta Kern to write the sequel to her story, "Mirror of the Dawn" which appeared in *IDIC 6*. The sequel is entitled "Paladin" and will appear in a special issue of *Guardian* some time in the future. Please, do not send SASEs; it will not appear for at least a year, and announcements will be made well in advance.

Now, go turn the page, and enjoy.

Peace,

Linda



MEDICAL EMERGENCY

Rebecca Ross

CAPTAIN'S LOG: STARDATE 4032.4. The *Enterprise* is en route to join the *Potemkin* and the *Constellation II* on a priority medical emergency on Kaprina, a Federation colony which is being ravaged by an epidemic of unknown origins. The labs and medical personnel of all ships are being placed at the disposal of the Kaprinans in the hope of quickly eliminating the disease. However, another problem has arisen. The *Enterprise* has taken a "short-cut" through a previously unexplored section of our quadrant, and we have located a planet which is Class M, and deserted. Our long-range scanners indicated a highly-populated, technologically advanced world, yet telemetry reports no life on the planet at all. Cities exist, devoid of their creators, and show very little deterioration. A flyby is insufficient to solve this mystery. Therefore I am dispatching a shuttle commanded by Mr. Spock to be retrieved after our mission to Kaprina is completed.

Christine Chapel set her small travel case on the floor by Dr. McCoy's desk and began col-

lecting medical supplies to take with her. The personal items were necessary. Since the shuttle would be grounded for at least two standard weeks, each crewmember would be carrying sufficient personal items for the duration.

Christine bustled about, killing time, trying to quell a certain nervous feeling. Landing parties didn't bother her; in fact, she'd enjoyed the excitement of discovery she'd known during participation in planetary exploration. What bothered her was the fact that she would be on a landing party with Mr. Spock. Fourteen days in that man's close proximity was *not* a pleasing prospect. She'd more or less gotten her feelings for the Vulcan under control, and while she wasn't worried about being able to handle herself around him, memories of past actions made her jittery. In short, Chris had made a complete ass of herself a couple of times, and while she'd once had the reason of being under the influence of an alien virus, the other incidents were inexcusable.

Christine almost dreaded the coming two weeks. Spock's presence was due to be a constant reminder of the past, and she wasn't sure he'd care for *her* presence.

She sighed, realizing there was no alternative, and continued her tasks, trying to collect everything she thought would be needed. She was so immersed in her own thoughts that she didn't hear Dr. McCoy enter. He cleared his throat and she jumped, startled.

"Sorry, Christine."

"I...that's all right, Doctor."

He took a close look at her as she laid some packages on his desk. "Settle down, Chris. There's no reason to be so nervous."

"It's *that* noticeable?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Damn!"

"Why are you so upset?"

"You should be able to figure that out."

"It's Spock, isn't it?"

She nodded. "This won't be an easy assignment, Doctor; for either of us. I doubt he'll appreciate my presence."

McCoy actually smiled at that. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. After all, he specifically requested you."

"He *what*!?" Christine snapped, stunned.

"That's right." McCoy rocked back on his heels, a Cheshire-cat grin on his face. "You know the regs, Chris. Landing parties of any duration must include medical personnel. We doctors can't go; we're assigned emergency duty on Kaprina. So, Spock asked for you. In his own words, 'Nurse Chapel is the best qualified, most experienced medical corpsman on the *Enterprise* - aside from the physicians.' You oughta feel complimented."

"Indeed I do, Doctor. I...just didn't expect it."

"Maybe not, but he's right. You're the best we've got, and frankly *I* feel better knowing you'll be responsible for the health of the shuttle crew. As far as Spock goes, don't let the past get in the way. You can bet *Spock* won't be thinking about it."

She smiled tentatively. "I guess you're right."

"I know I am. Now, let's get down to business. I see you've gathered supplies." He gestured towards the items on the desk.

"Yes. I'm taking the standard medical kit, but I thought of other items. This planet's condition is odd, we've no idea what's caused its desertion, and I'd like to be as prepared as possible for *any* contingencies."

"All right. Let's go over all this and make sure you've got everything *I* would. Then I'll have

an orderly take all this to the shuttle."

"Just don't overload that shuttle, Dr. McCoy. Mr. Spock will never let you forget it if you do."

"How well I know, Chris. How well I know."

The shuttlecraft *Columbus* lifted smoothly away from the *Enterprise*. Spock piloted the ship out, heading for the planet directly ahead of them. As soon as the shuttle was safely away, the *Enterprise* warped out of sight to complete her mercy mission, leaving the shuttle entirely on its own.

The crew was relaxed, curious, and anxious to be about their investigation. The mysteriously dead world was intriguing and finding the answer to the riddle was due to be a fascinating experience.

Besides Spock and Chapel, the party included Jon Carol, geologist; Leslie James, biologist; Pam Canton, zoologist; Frank Freeman, anthropologist; and Dan Leveille, who doubled as engineer and recorder.

The trip was not a long one and they were soon in orbit. Spock flew slowly, scanning carefully before deciding to set down. Sensors confirmed the early findings and added other data. There was no animal life whatsoever. Insect life was abundant, as was plant life; but the world below them was devoid of *any* warm-blooded mammalian-types.

Spock landed on the outskirts of a city, and before exiting the shuttle, ran a complete atmospheric check. No abnormalities or harmful agents were detected, and it seemed safe to begin the exploration. The group quickly assembled and Spock cautiously led the way towards the nearby city, taking all precautions possible. He certainly didn't want whatever disaster had wiped out the population of this world to overtake *his* party.

The city rose before them, clean-lined and beautiful, a testimony to the ingenuity of whatever beings had once inhabited this world. That they had been highly advanced was undoubted. A tricorder check revealed that the world had been deserted for about 200 years, but the people had built well, though plant life was encroaching on the road which led into the city, breaking through the pavement. These edifices wore their years well, however, and several members of the group speculated that planetary weather conditions weren't very harsh. Certainly climatic conditions had been kind to this city.

A motorized vehicle sat abandoned on the road ahead of them, a silent testimonial to disaster. Dan Leveille's eyes glowed at the prospect of inspecting the antique. "It looks to be in good condition from here, Mr. Spock. I'd like to take a look at it."

"I see no reason why you should not, Mr. Leveille." The dark, rangy engineer started off at a trot, leaving the others behind.

Pam Canton muttered an uncomplimentary expression as she slapped at a bug. Christine reached into her carry-bag and produced a spritzer of insect repellent.

"Here. This should keep any insect at a respectful distance. Pass it around."

The group halted for a moment while the bottle of insect repellent made its rounds. When they were through, Christine tucked it back in her bag, satisfied by the absence of insects in her immediate vicinity.

"It's too bad there are no birds. There would be a lot fewer insects. It seems so odd not to hear a bird song," Chris noted.

"It *is* silent," Pam commented.

The silence was abruptly shattered by a shout from Dan Leveille who motioned frantically for the group to join him by the vehicle. They hurried forward and in moments saw the cause of Dan's alarm: two skeletons lay sprawled on the vehicle's seat, their bones intermixed.

Spock gestured to Christine, but she was already taking tricorder readings. "They are obviously humanoid; one male, one female. I'll need some time to analyze bone samples, but from them I can determine blood type and other vital information. There is no recognizable cause of death."

"Not unexpected."

"No, Sir," Christine replied as she carefully removed and labeled some of the smaller bones from each skeleton. "Analysis of these will tell us more, but I doubt we'll get the answer to our mystery here."

"Then we shall seek it elsewhere."

Silence descended upon the group as the crew continued its journey. A bit further on, they discovered another vehicle, this one sitting askew in the middle of the road. It came as no surprise to find more skeletons inside. Christine dutifully took readings, and removed samples from the two adults and three children.

All along the road vehicles lay strewn, each housing the remains of its dead occupants. The story never varied, nor the procedure. Finally, Christine shook her head. "I don't believe there is any use in taking more samples, Mr. Spock. If this is any indication, we'll find nothing here but bones."

"Agreed."

"And bone samples can only tell me just so much. There're plenty more if I need them."

Spock nodded. "We shall proceed, then."

As they entered the city, the broad avenue narrowed into a grim, grisly scenario. Skeletons lay on the sidewalks, spilling out of doorways; many were curled in a fetal position as if they had died in great pain. Inside, the buildings were also lit-

tered with skeletons. Bones of animals...probably pets...accompanied many of the humanoid dead, and a film of dust overlay everything inside, creating an eerie, otherworldly quality to the bizarre scene.

Christine quickly scanned the area with her tricorder, then reported, "Nothing. Absolutely no clue as to what happened. The disaster was so sudden that it caught everyone by surprise. They must have literally died in their tracks."

Leslie James shook his head. "It's too much to comprehend. Is there any need to explore further, Mr. Spock?"

"I do not think so, Mr. James. Doubtless there are many more bones in this city, but it is unlikely that they shall provide us with answers. We shall return to the shuttle where Miss Chapel can perform her tests. Perhaps then we will learn more."

"I'm just glad to get away from this...." James gestured eloquently at the city.

"We shall visit other cities, Mr. James," Spock informed him. "I suggest you prepare yourself for seeing more."

"You think this is a planet-wide condition, Sir?" Pam asked, a tight expression on her usually clear, open face.

"I do, indeed."

By evening, the landing party had selected and explored another city where, as Spock has predicted, the inhabitants were found dead in the streets. The thorough Vulcan had immediately selected another city to be explored the next day, and the landing party flew there.

While the others secured camp and prepared supper, Chapel began running analyses on the bone samples taken earlier. By the time she was finished, everyone but Spock had retired, and Chris sounded disgusted as she told him, "These results are anything but complete!"

A delicate eyebrow soared. "How so?"

"As you know, Mr. Spock, bones can tell us a great deal about the person - size, sex, age, weight, state of health, even blood type. I can give you a rather extensive profile of all these people, but what it boils down to is that they were in good health at the time they died. I've enough samples to make a standard profile; I know what the norm was here, but that is all. I cannot tell you why these people died; since they were healthy at the time of their deaths, there is *no* natural, recognizable cause. Radiation would have left radiation levels, fire would leave obvious physical evidence. Poison gas is a possibility, but I'm not convinced."

"Why? It would have dissipated not long after its initial use and we would not be able to detect it."

"True, but it would have probably killed off the insects as well; and as we have noted, there are plenty of insects here."

"I believe I see where your conclusion is leading, Miss Chapel. Perhaps an epidemic of some sort, or even germ warfare."

"It's a good possibility, Mr. Spock. If their cities are any criteria by which to judge, they were technologically capable of waging biological war. A planet-wide epidemic of monstrous proportions is not a viable answer, but germ warfare is, and it would explain why only insects and plants are left here. The only thing that bothers me is why we haven't discovered any traces of such germs in the atmosphere."

"We have not been looking for them."

"I have. After seeing the carnage in the first city, I became suspicious. Nothing showed up in our atmospheric checks - not even a random, unknown molecule. As far as we can tell, this is a typical, class M world. My own checks show nothing unusual, yet the type of germs used in germ warfare are long-lived. They *should* still be around."

"Agreed. Yet, if none are to be found, we must conclude that either the germs were short-lived, or else our scanners cannot record them."

White-faced, Christine said, "I'd already thought of both possibilities, Mr. Spock. The second one scares me - because it is all too probable."

Christine had only been asleep for a couple of hours when someone gently shook her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see Spock bending over her. He immediately removed his hand from her shoulder, saying, "Nurse, you have a patient."

She sat up, awake instantly. "Who?"

"Mr. Leveille."

"Symptoms?"

"Fever and intense pain."

Chris moved to Leveille's bedroll, her tricorder pointed at him. He was curled on his side, moaning, and his fever, which registered 100°, was rising steadily.

"How long has he been this way?" she demanded as she injected Leveille with pain killer and antibiotic.

"I cannot be certain. However, five minutes ago, I was alerted by a groan from Mr. Leveille. I ran a tricorder check, then awakened you."

"So he could have been suffering for quite some time with no one the wiser." Chris checked the diagnostic readout. "Damn! That's impossible! There's nothing wrong, nothing to cause the pain and fever, yet he's in agony."

"You are absolutely certain?"

"Positive. The readout shows no recognizable reason for his condition. Unless something else shows up, I'm afraid I'll have to say we've encountered the disease which killed the inhabitants."

"A very likely possibility."

"I'll take blood samples, of course, and run all the tests I can. The problem is, Mr. Spock, I do not have the necessary equipment to run the proper tests to discover the agent of this disease."

"Perhaps we can find you some equipment."

"Where?"

"Surely, Miss Chapel, the previous inhabitants possessed medical centers and laboratory equipment"

"You're right, Mr. Spock. I should have thought of that myself. But, until I can locate the disease, any treatment is going to be guesswork on my part." She took another reading. "The medicine I've given him isn't doing any good. His fever is still rising and he's in agony. I'll try a stronger antibiotic in conjunction with an anti-toxin. I can't tell you the cause, Mr. Spock, but I can tell you this - if his fever continues to rise, his brain will literally burn up."

None of the medicines had any effect on Leveille. His fever and pain continued to increase without cessation, and within an hour, he was dead. Even before Leveille's death, Christine found herself with another patient when Jon Carol exhibited the same symptoms.

Chapel began checks on the rest of the landing party at regular intervals. By morning, only she and Spock remained unaffected. One by one, each member of the landing party became ill, and one by one, they died - in agony. Through it all, Chris did her utmost to stem the tide of the disease, and after the five died, she efficiently conducted a routine autopsy of the victims. But after they had buried the last casualty, Christine finally exploded.

"I feel so damned useless, Mr. Spock! I couldn't do *anything* for them! I couldn't even ease their pain! All I could do was sit by and watch them die! I'm a well-trained nurse, but I could be a primitive witch doctor, for all the good I did them!"

"Nurse, you can not accomplish the impossible. We now know how the inhabitants of this world died, though we do not know the source. But remember this - a disease which is created to destroy acts swiftly. It must, else its victims will have time to effect a cure. Such a disease is not meant to be cured."

Christine looked numbly at Spock. "I know, Sir. But I must reconcile this within myself. If you will excuse me, I'd like to do that in private."

Spock needed no imagination to realize what Christine intended. A good cry - perhaps even a bit of harmless violence like throwing rocks against other rocks would help her release the tension she'd been radiating for the past few hours. Everything had built up fast - too fast to be easily handled - and Spock knew humans needed release from such frustrations. He felt that same need himself, and while Christine was dealing with her frustrations in her way, he slipped into meditation and dealt with his own frustrations.

An hour later, Chapel returned to the shuttle to find Spock just coming out of his meditative state. They eyed each other for a moment before Spock asked, "Are you all right, Nurse?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock. Thank you. I feel much better, though I'm far from happy about this mess."

"Understandable. However, that is not precisely what I meant. How do you feel physically?"

"A bit tired, but other than that I'm..." Suddenly the implication of that statement hit her hard and her eyes widened as realization sunk in. "My God! I'm fine - and I shouldn't be!"

"Exactly. Why are you alive, much less well?"

"I don't know. I'm not really surprised that you weren't stricken by this disease - your Vulcan blood should provide some immunities. Except for you, the landing party consisted of humans with iron-based blood, and the inhabitants of this world also possessed iron-based blood. I'm human, so the question is, why wasn't I affected? Everyone succumbed so quickly I should think I would have been affected by now if I were going to be."

"That is the angle upon which to concentrate. You have a great deal of data, and can use the shuttle's small computers to process it. I want to find a medical center and try to tap their records"

"If you can get power to their computers - assuming they *had* computers - and assuming you can figure their computers out. You're extremely competent in your field, Mr. Spock, but those are a lot of 'ifs'."

"Perhaps. However, I believe we can pare those 'ifs' down. And, as you are competent in your field of medical research, I believe we may be able to make some headway."

"We can only try. I'm not planning to sit on my butt waiting for the *Enterprise* to show up. Let's go find some answers."

~~~~~  
After several hours of fly-by scouting, Spock spotted several locations which could have housed medical facilities. He parked the shuttle at each one and did an on-the-spot check. Most proved to be small hospitals with only the barest lab facilities, yet the general area must have had a central research laboratory. It took more searching, and by the time Spock finally tracked it down, Christine had correlated all the data she possessed with

the shuttle's computers.

"It's slower going than if I had the *Enterprise*'s computers, but the job is done."

Spock eased his frame into a chair and swiveled to face Christine. "What have you found?"

"Plenty. All symptoms are the same, starting with chills, fever and pain. The progress of the fever is most noticeable, of course, rising so quickly that it kills. However, rash and convulsions also can occur."

"There are other items which could be secondary symptoms, but I'm not sure. You see, the fever kills so quickly that other symptoms don't always have time to mature. I found evidence of blood clumping and hemolysis. In other words, the red blood cells are disrupted and clump together, which of course starves the body and brain of oxygen, and ends in blood depletion. Had these symptoms appeared first, I would have given transfusions, though I doubt that would have helped. The transfused blood would have clumped also. As it was, these symptoms appeared last - in two cases, not at all - and transfusions would have been useless. I didn't even have time to set up the blood units, much less administer them before the patients died. The fever killed almost too quickly to spot these symptoms, and I'd guess that the original inhabitants died even faster from fever. After all, this disease was aimed specifically at them and there might have been enough differences between human blood and theirs to prolong death in humans."

"I can tell you something else: iron-based blood was not the only thing these people had in common with our landing party. All casualties possessed Rh positive blood. You and I don't."

"Why should negative blood be immune?"

"I wasn't sure about it at first; however, the clumping and cellular disruption gave me a clue. Positive and negative blood types seem to be a common occurrence in humanoid races. It's one of the few constants which transcends planets. The difference between positive and negative blood is an antigen known as the D-Factor which is present in positive blood and absent in negative blood. This disease is analogous to the problems of a baby whose blood is negative and whose mother's blood is positive. When negative combines with positive, the D-Factor in the positive is destroyed, setting up a chain reaction which results in exactly what we have here - blood clumping, depletion, starvation and hematic disruption. Symptoms are the same: chills, high fever, convulsions, and rash ending in death."

"I suspect we are dealing with a virus, which could very easily have lain dormant all these years. It attacks and destroys the D-Factor. Since you and I have negative blood, there is no D-Factor to be destroyed. Therefore, we're immune. However, if we *are* dealing with a virus, we could easily be carriers."

"I take it you have found no trace of this virus."



"None whatsoever, and we're going to have to in order to find a way to kill it. Viruses are hardy, but ever since they made the breakthrough, the universal antibiotic usually kills them. It has to be tailored to the specific virus, but it didn't even *touch* this one. I do have plenty of blood samples from the landing party, and if this research center you've found is decently equipped, I should be able to get a line on this disease."

Spock rose, saying, "The medical complex seems well-equipped. If you're ready...."

"Give me time to stuff all these samples into carry cases and we can get going."

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Power proved to be no problem. Like most such centers on Earth, the medical complex had its own power source and Spock had no trouble tapping it. The two took over the labs which, strangely enough, were free of any bones. They quickly dismissed the oddity and concentrated on business. Spock and Christine put their carry cases on the table, then deposited sleeping bags and other essential items in a corner. While Christine set about familiarizing herself with the facility and identifying materials, Spock concentrated on the computer system, tying it in with the Universal Translator. Progress came slowly - but it came.

By nightfall, Christine was able, thanks to the diagnostic tricorder, to figure precisely the components of all the various chemicals in the lab. She quickly reported her findings to Spock. "What we've got here are standard chemicals and compounds. I've labeled them with the chemical symbols of their Earthly equivalents, and I'm ready now to begin chemical analysis of the blood and tissue samples taken from the landing party."

Spock vetoed the idea. "Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"You have had very little sleep during the previous two days, and it is essential that you be alert when running those tests. You can begin testing in the morning."

Christine didn't argue with his logic. After a quick meal, she dumped a sleeping bag on one of the cots they had found stored in the lab, and crawled in. She was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Next morning, Christine awoke to the dry chatter of a computer going full blast, and the sight of Spock sitting in front of a terminal, studiously pushing buttons. He turned as she sat up.

"I trust you slept well, Miss Chapel."

"I did, Mr. Spock, but it's obvious to me that you didn't even try to rest."

"I assure you that I am quite all right. Vulcans do not require the amount of sleep humans do."

Christine extricated herself from her sleeping

bag, grabbed her tricorder and aimed it at Spock. "Don't even *try* to pull that routine on me, Mister. I'm wise to it, and it won't work!" An eyebrow arched at that, but Christine ignored it. "You haven't slept since we landed and so far, lack of rest has not affected you. But, if you keep this up, it will. You may outrank me, but I am senior medical officer on this mission. Your health is my responsibility, and if I have to, I'll pull rank on you."

The other eyebrow arched. "And just how would you enforce it?"

"You may very well find out. Dr. McCoy has been my instructor. When it comes to knowing the most devious methods of handling recalcitrant patients, he's a master of the art. Do I make myself clear?"

"Indeed you do, Nurse."

"Good. Besides," she relented a bit, "if I'm to find the disease, much less the cure, I'll need your help. We've got to work together, so please, don't force a confrontation."

"That was not my intention, I assure you. I promise you that I will not do anything so foolish as to intentionally risk my health."

"I should hope not. Still, I'll be around to remind you should you become too engrossed in your work."

"Now that, Miss Chapel, is a likely possibility."

"I know. You've done it before." She smiled. "I'll bet you haven't had anything to eat, either."

"No, but Vulcans --"

"Please, Mr. Spock. Just *don't* say it."

For an instant, Christine would have sworn the corners of Spock's mouth twitched on the verge of a smile. But, it never materialized. Christine shook her head, then turned to the task of fixing coffee and heating some of the prepared food packets they'd brought with them. It didn't take long, and when it was ready, Chris set a plate in front of Spock. He turned from the computer and began eating.

"Soon as I finish breakfast, I've got to get started on those tests."

"There won't be any need, Miss Chapel."

"What?" she asked, startled by the possibility. "Have you found the virus?"

"No. But I was able to glean a great deal of information. Our speculation on germ warfare was correct. It seems this planet had been engaged in total conflict for a number of years. The enemy was located on the opposite side of the globe, and both waged war with missiles rather than through direct combat."

"It's a wonder they didn't blow the planet

apart. Yet, look at the condition these cities are in. I don't think they were ever hit with missiles."

"True. However, scientific knowledge was not equally dispersed. The scientists on this side of the world had a far better guidance system than did their enemies. They excelled in the mechanics of rocketry and missiles; their opponents did not. In fact, the scientists here developed anti-missile missiles which tracked and destroyed the enemy's missiles.

"The other side excelled in biological science and developed germ warfare. They loosed a virus upon the people here and wiped out 99% of the population with positive type blood. The unusual fact is that on this world, negative type blood was virtually non-existent. A few scientists survived and gathered here, trying to discover the virus, but they could not detect anything. Oddly enough, while they expected conquering forces to descend upon the survivors, no one ever came, which led to speculation that the enemy had succumbed to the virus as well."

"Surely the creators of the virus had also created a preventative."

"One would think so."

"Yet, the rest of the world is as devoid of life as this part is. Any what happened to the scientists? Didn't their descendants---?"

"There were no descendants. Those people with negative blood were probably carriers. They were never able to find the virus and never able to ascertain if the virus were dormant within their systems. There was one dramatic change after the viral attack - the survivors were sterile."

"Oh boy! Did they just give up, or what?"

"They reached a point where they could learn nothing else about the disease so they went to a remote mountain resort where the reminders of disaster would not be so constant, and they could live out their lives in peace."

"A sad commentary on mortals. Well, perhaps we can succeed where they couldn't. If we only knew the location of the lab where this virus was created, the records there would tell us what we need to know."

"I have obtained sufficient information from the computer to pinpoint the general area of one of these labs."

"Then what are we waiting for, Mr. Spock? Let's get going."

Their quest took them across a vast ocean. The computer obligingly provided Spock with maps of enemy cities, as well as a projection of the research center's possible location. The computer was wrong.

The contrast between the previous cities they had visited and the ones they searched on the other side of the ocean was sharp. These cities were broken, crumbling, empty shells instead of crisp, enduring buildings. Fire had rampaged through them, leaving its own brand of charred ruin and piles of blackened rubble. There was one similarity: skeletons abounded, littering the streets, mute evidence of a truly hollow victory.

"Somebody made a colossal mistake," Christine remarked as they flew slowly over the city.

"Indeed. I can not imagine how it happened; however, I would say that these people quite literally received a dose of their own medicine."

Christine slowly fastened very wide eyes on Spock. Had he been human, she would have groaned at the pun. But one look at his intense face and she realized that he was very serious and had not even recognized the pun as such. She decided to forget it, and concentrated on their flight path. They finally located a research center, but one glance told them they would find no answers there.

"Totally destroyed," Chris muttered, disgusted. "I sure hope this isn't the place."

"I rather doubt it."

"Why?"

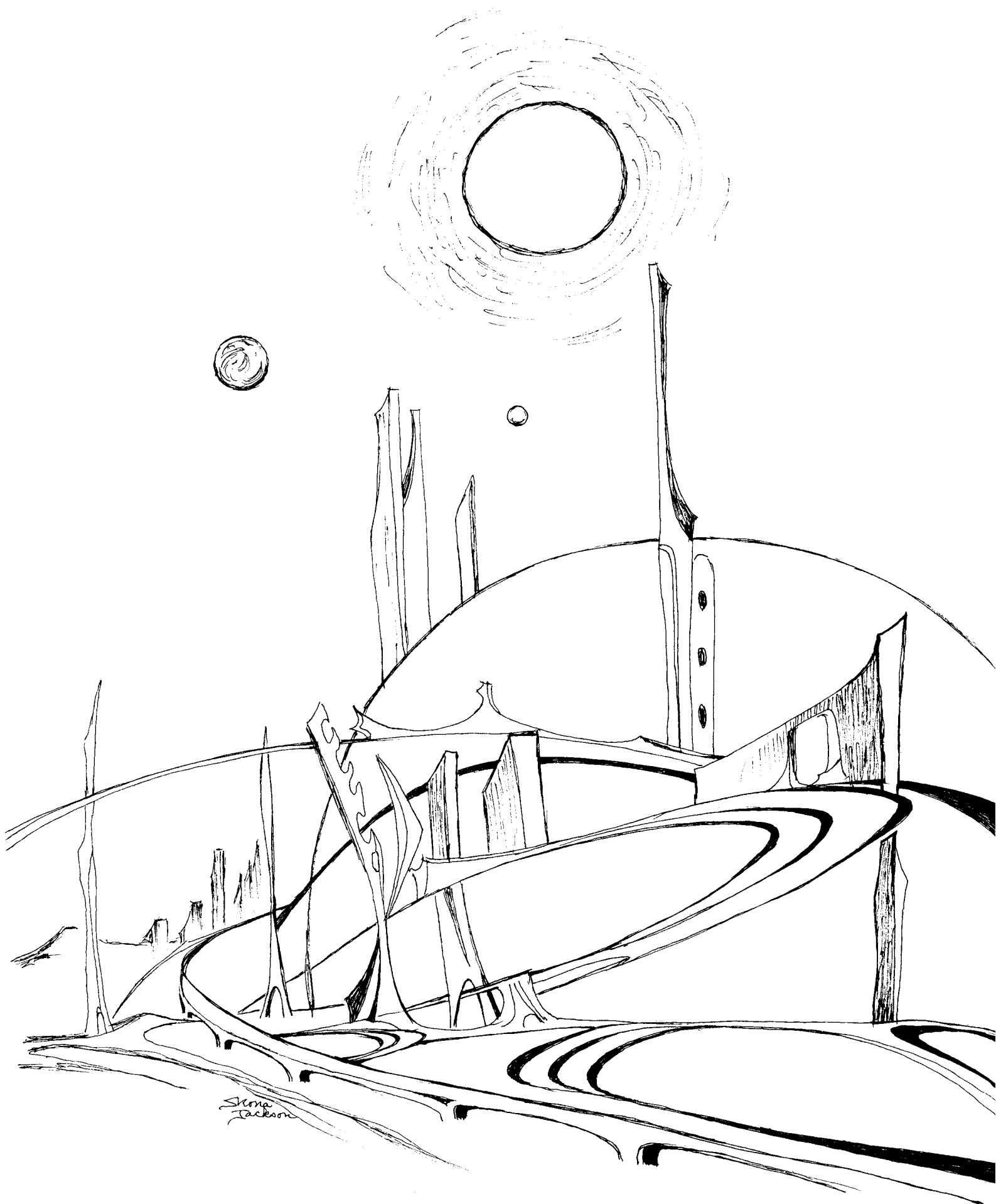
"The virus took time to create; and the computer's projection aside, assuming it was a government project, the laboratory would have been in a more secluded, easily guarded, location than this, well away from main target areas. They couldn't afford to have the virus accidentally loosed if an enemy bomb destroyed the laboratory. I doubt anyone outside high government officials would have known its location."

"Odds are, then, that it's intact. How do we find it?"

"We will use ship's sensors. If the destruction here is anything by which to judge, there will be very few structures undamaged which could have served as a research lab."

"So, we resort to process of elimination and in-person check of all likely candidates. Well, the sooner we get started, the sooner we'll find out what happened."

They found what they were looking for - eventually. After five days of patiently (and sometimes impatiently) doing fly-by scans and on-foot searches of buildings, the discovery of the laboratory was almost anticlimatic. They found it, nestled in a secluded mountain valley, well away from any cities. The building itself was in an excellent state of preservation. They found no skeletons inside - only bare, silent rooms, chock full of equipment. They staked out the central computer complex, then brought in food and other items from the shuttle, settling in for a long stay. As before, Spock got the power going, and,



after hooking in the translator, began coaxing the computer while Christine began her task of identifying chemicals. There were more chemicals here, and the bioscience instruments proved to be of a more sophisticated nature than had those in the other medical center. There was also a small vault, still locked, which - according to a tricorder scan - contained sealed vials. Chris turned to Spock, a grim smile on her face.

"I think I've found the virus, Mr. Spock. At least, this vault contains sealed vials. Somebody wanted to make sure they weren't tampered with accidentally and I would guess that this is the virus."

Spock checked her tricorder before concurring. "A logical assumption, under the circumstances."

"How do we get the vault open? A phaser?"

Spock shook his head. "The computer should control the locking mechanism. We can open it later. Before you begin handling the virus, you might want to see how it was created."

"I certainly would."

Christine pulled up a lab chair as Spock leaned forward, one fist on his hip, and began going over the readouts with Christine, tracing the history of the virus. It was a long history.

"Unbelievable," Christine muttered. "They were after a fast-acting weapon, and they made one. I see how it was done, too. I could easily recreate the virus myself by following the steps outlined."

"But can you create an antidote?"

"I'd better. The virus is supposed to remain dormant in the bloodstream of persons with negative blood. Odds are, we're carriers, and a side-effect is sterility, for the virus causes a reduction in sperm count. Since it causes no damage to the reproductive organs, if the virus is destroyed, the person can once again become fertile."

She retrieved her tricorder and began making adjustments. "I know what I'm looking for now, Mr. Spock. It's such a miniscule life form that it would not be picked up by our instruments on normal settings, especially in its dormant state. It would have been pure luck to hit the right combination." She activated the scan and checked, first herself and then Spock.

"We're carriers, all right."

She continued scanning the lab, just on a hunch, and whistled silently as the readings went wild. "Holy...! I've never seen anything like this, not even during an epidemic. The air is thick with the virus. Those scientists got more than they bargained for."

Spock nodded. "Their virus obviously got away from them."

"How, though? And what about a cure or a preventative? They had to have one. Only a fool would have loosed this thing without innoculating

himself first."

"Perhaps they were fools. The computer should have that information."

After another hour of sorting through computer readouts, the rest of the story emerged.

"According to this," Spock said, "the people here became desperate. Their enemies were quite accurately devastating cities and major military objectives. They had no defense."

"That would certainly cause desperation, especially since their missiles were destroyed long before they ever reached their intended targets. But we already knew that."

"Indeed. This side finally implemented germ warfare; a project which was originally a long-term one. They pushed their scientists to finish the virus and create a preventative vaccine for themselves."

"Sounds like a hurry-up job."

"It was. The vaccine was harder to create than the virus. As you noted, it is an extremely hardy, resistant strain, but the scientists finally discovered a vaccine which immunized - when in direct contact with the virus."

"But," Chris pointed out, "that doesn't necessarily mean anything. It has to be used in test subjects to determine if... oh no! They didn't!"

"Unfortunately that is precisely what happened. As soon as the vaccine was developed, the government took the virus and launched it against their enemies - without testing the vaccine."

"They *must* have been desperate to take such a gamble."

"And they lost. The virus quickly migrated back via the winds, and destroyed most of the population here. The scientists left alive tried - like their counterparts - to find an antidote, without success. Their work is all laid out for you, but I'm not certain it will do either of us any good."

"Why not?"

Spock pointed out a section. As Christine read it, a feeling of dread began to descend. Finally she looked up, and her gaze locked with Spock's as she spoke softly. "Their most promising cure coincides chemically with our Universal Antibiotic - and it didn't even weaken the virus. If that's the best we can do, Mr. Spock, you and I will be stuck here for the rest of our lives."

Chris yanked a small tape cartridge out of the computer, disgusted and disheartened. In pure frustration she flung it against the wall with all her force.

"Are you all right, Miss Chapel?"

"I guess so. Sorry about the disturbance."

"Do not be. Tension has been building in you these past few days. You need to release that tension, and if throwing the tape helps...."

"That's just it, Mr. Spock," she told him dejectedly as she sank into her chair, "it really doesn't help."

"Then perhaps conversation will." As Chris threw him a questioning look, he replied, "It is not wise for humans to keep such frustrations 'bottled-up', for they tend to explode. I have seen it happened too often, and it would be far better if you talked those frustrations over with me."

"Maybe. I really don't want to unload them, and the emotions which go with them, on you."

"Believe me. That would be infinitely preferable to the alternative. I am not certain of my abilities to handle the situation should those frustrations explode."

A startled expression crossed Christine's face but Spock ignored it and finished his statement. "Earlier you told me that we would have to work together. This is all a part of that working together."

Chris shook her head. "I don't know, Spock. I just don't know any more. I felt so helpless when the rest of the landing party died - and I feel even more helpless now. I've followed procedure, I've run every test I know, I've tried so many possible cures that they're all beginning to blur, and still *nothing* works! Everything I try is wrong, and every solution I've given that damn computer has been spit back out with its usual sarcastic cracks like, 'YOU GOOFED! TRY AGAIN!' Spock, the *Enterprise* is going to be here any day now - hell, it's three days past the two-week minimum - and I'm no closer to a solution than I was when I started! I'm frustrated and I'm scared stiff! If Captain Kirk should decide to beam down without contacting us first, he'll die!"

"I have already thought of that possibility, and in order to forestall such an action, I have set the shuttle's transmitter on emergency. When the *Enterprise* ties into it, a recorded message will tell them to contact us and warn them not to beam down."

Christine breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that's one less worry." She surveyed the tape cassettes in front of her and shook her head. "But for the rest of it...."

"You aren't giving up, are you?"

"No. Even though I feel like it, I'm not *about* to give up. But I do feel helpless."

"I can understand. However, you are trying to solve a medical mystery which defeated even the creators of the disease. Those scientists had far more experience with it than you --"

"And they couldn't crack it," she returned

bitterly. "Solving this mystery may very well come under the heading of miracle."

"You have done a thorough job of laying the groundwork and have eliminated a great deal. When the *Enterprise* returns, you will have her resources at your disposal."

"I know that. The thing is, I've eliminated all the standard solutions known to Federation medicine. Medicines which *should* kill *any* virus have absolutely no effect on this one. With any other virus, I could take out infected blood and make a serum from that. But not in this case. 'ONE MORE TIME, SUCKER!' was the computer's answer to that. Even the *Enterprise* can't draw a non-existent cure out of a magic hat."

"It is possible the computer may not be functioning correctly. I can run some cross-checks."

"Go ahead, for all the good it'll do. I don't think we can lay this to the computer. I intend to feed all tests and results into the *Enterprise*'s computer, just in case, but don't look to find an answer that easily. As it stands now, we are up a creek."

He arched an eyebrow and she retorted. "I think you know what that expression means, and it's appropriate. If we can't find a cure for this virus, we can never return to the *Enterprise*. And, I want to go home."

"As do I, and I know the alternative only too well. If standard remedies have no effect upon this virus, then we will have to check out other possibilities."

"There are countless possibilities, and I'm going to need you and the computers to check out every last one. Maybe you can spot something I've overlooked."

"Perhaps, but it is far more likely that the correct solution has not yet been discovered."

"Let's hope it gets discovered soon." She smiled softly, then said, "Thank you for the talk. It did help. I'll get back to work now."

She picked up a tape, but before she could insert it in the computer, Spock's hand covered hers and he took the tape away from her. "You have refused to allow me to work too long without rest. It is now my turn. You have been driving yourself much too hard and without sufficient rest or diversion. Before you go back to work, leave this building and walk for a while, then sleep." Before she could protest, he added softly, "That is an order...Christine."

Alternatives to standard methods of destroying the virus proved to be fruitless. Again and again, the computer gave them negative results in its usual caustic manner.

"I'd like to throttle the person who programmed 'BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME, SWEETIE!' and 'ONE

...MORE...TIME!' into that bloody computer!"

"You will not get the opportunity. That person has been dead for at least 200 years." As she threw him a startled look he concurred with her opinion of the computer. "I, too, find the computer's personality annoying. I would correct it, but that personality is intertwined with the basic memory programming and I could easily erase crucial programs."

"So we put up with it. The damned thing just gets more and more irritating."

"Indeed."

She smiled. "Maybe some hypothesis on radiation will tone it down."

"I doubt that seriously. I take it that your next line of query is radiation?"

"Yes. After all, radiation isn't all destructive, and certain types have been used medically for centuries. And, *we* have access to radiation that the natives wouldn't have known about."

"A logical avenue of research."

"You program the properties of each type of radiation into the computer, Mr. Spock. Maybe we can come up with something positive."

The job was tedious and seemingly unproductive; Christine watched Spock feeding dry facts into a computer. It was not the most interesting occupation, especially when the foregone conclusion of negative results proved out time and again.

Christine was better able to handle her frustration. Talking to Spock alleviated a good bit of her tension, and helped clear her mind. She'd returned to work better able to deal with the frustration. She had needed that bit of perspective. She still felt like she was knocking her head against a brick wall, but she was stubborn enough to keep on hitting at that wall until she knocked a hole in it. But it was such a lonely responsibility.

Chris recalled the words McCoy had spoken to her before she left the *Enterprise*, the confidence he had expressed in her abilities, and his concurring with Spock that she was the best person for the job. During moments of depression, Chris bitterly denounced her abilities, feeling she had betrayed her responsibilities. She had done absolutely nothing to help the landing party, and she was equally helpless to find a way to kill the virus, despite the fact that she could take her time and cover every likely - and unlikely - possibility.

Fortunately, she had little time for depression. When reason reclaimed its hold on her - as it usually did quickly - Chris reminded herself that she was trying to conquer a disease which, as Spock had said, was not intended to be cured. If anything, she was more than living up to the trust he placed in her, but if she succeeded in doing the seemingly impossible, it would not be solely her victory.

She wouldn't be at her present stage of research without Spock. While she could handle all the testing the medical research entailed, she wasn't skilled in computers. Spock was, and that computer had proved essential. In all the years the two had served aboard the *Enterprise*, this was the first time she and Spock had worked this closely together. Rank and command suddenly had no meaning, had dissolved into nothingness as they pressed on in search of a solution. It truly was a joint effort; at stake was the only life either could be content with.

At one time, Christine would have found the prospect of having Spock all to herself for the rest of her life, intriguing and pleasing. But not now. Were this world an ideal Eden instead of a hell, Chris wouldn't settle for it. Though she had resolved her own feelings for Spock, it had been a case of admitting her love, realizing Spock did not love her, then conquering her emotions and putting them in their place.

These past weeks, Chris had seen a different side of Spock, a portion of his personality which he wouldn't normally have revealed. At first, she'd thought it to be the human side of him, understanding her feelings of discouragement and knowing how to handle them. She'd finally realized that her frustrations were reflecting his own, and while his Vulcan nature was experiencing them, his human nature allowed him the insight to understand her anxieties as well as his own. But it was the mixture of the human and the Vulcan that had proven the greatest asset; the Vulcan in Spock allowed him to remain detached enough to stand back and view the problem pragmatically while the human instincts showed him the way to go about resolving the matter.

A most amazing man, Spock, and if anything, Christine felt closer to him than she ever had, though not in the way she had once wanted - or *thought* she'd wanted. Now she considered Spock a friend, a comrade; indeed it would be difficult to work with someone so closely in such desperate circumstances and not feel a comradeship. Chris knew she would always admire and respect him, and love him as a friend; but never again would she be *in* love with him. These past weeks had taught her a great deal about this Vulcan, and about herself, and she knew that this time of shared defeats and frustrations had also taught him much. If only they could share triumph as well as tragedy.

When that happened, they would return to the *Enterprise* and continue as before, but Chris would take with her some very interesting and precious memories.

She smiled to herself. No, she couldn't condemn Spock to a life on this lonely, desolate world for his life was on the *Enterprise*, prowling the stars - just as hers was. But the memories of a gentle, warm, understanding man who felt the same frustration and sadness she did over the loss of the landing party, and who was capable of helping lift the depression they both had experienced, with conversation or even his own Vulcan-style humor, would last her a lifetime.

The *Enterprise* arrived later that afternoon. They had just started a final analysis of various types of radiation when Spock's communicator began beeping frantically. It was lying on a desk and both Spock and Christine reached for it at the same time. In fact, each got a finger-grip on it simultaneously, but Chris let go and gestured, "You may have the *honor*."

"A rather dubious one."

Nevertheless, Spock silenced the beeping as he flicked the communicator open, acknowledged the signal, and began filling Kirk in on their situation. McCoy, listening in, occasionally added some terse comments or pointed questions. When they finally finished Kirk sighed, "It doesn't sound good. Are you *sure* your computer is working right?"

"Positive," Spock replied. "I have run a number of cross-checks, and our computer is operating correctly. However, we want a check by the *Enterprise's* main computer. If you will have Miss Uhura tie us in, we can begin feeding data."

"All right," Kirk acknowledged and Uhura began setting a channel. "We'll see what our computer makes of this mess. I'll call a meeting in the briefing room. Will 1400 hours give you enough time to finish and make your report?"

"It should be quite sufficient, Captain."

"Then go to it."

A dejected group sat around the briefing room, glumly eyeing the computer.

"Damn!" McCoy swore. "I should have known our computer would confirm those results. Spock's too good to let an error slip past, and Christine knows her job backwards, forwards, inside-out and downside up."

"We could expect nothing less than a confirmation," Spock's voice replied over the speaker.

"Doesn't mean we have to like it," McCoy grumbled. "How're the radiation tests coming?"

"We have the results," Christine told him. "They're not of any help. Delta radiation would kill the virus, and us in the bargain. Epsilon Rays have no effect and the same holds true for Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Kappa, Cosmic, and X-Rays, as well as Hakei, Seton and Van Allen Radiation. Radium and Uranium also have no effect, and Celebium would cause a mutation which would result in a virus even more difficult to kill than the one we are *now* fighting."

"Maybe we should go to Omicron Ceti III and try the spores on them, Bones," Kirk suggested. "They kept the colonists from dying due to Berthold Rays. It might be worth a try."

Spock's voice answered. "We thought of that, Captain. Again negative. The spores need the Berthold Rays in order to survive under normal condi-

tions. Without the rays, the virus would instantly kill the spores."

"And with them, Spock?"

"The spores would live, but would not have any effect upon the virus."

"Another dead end," Kirk replied. "I guess the only thing to do is keep trying."

Christine sat hunched over her desk, head buried in her hands, lost in thought. Even with the *Enterprise's* resources, their problem was difficult. It was too bad an easy solution like those spores couldn't be found. Suddenly a thought struck her, and she raised her head, shaking it in disbelief. "You know," she mused, "we may have overlooked something."

"We have been quite thorough," Spock replied. "What do you believe we have overlooked?"

"Berthold Rays."

"But you've checked that already," McCoy's voice protested via communicator.

"Not precisely, Doctor," Spock replied. "I believe I understand what Miss Chapel is saying. We checked Berthold Rays in conjunction with the spores - specifically to see if Berthold Rays would sustain the spores against the virus. We did *not* check to see if Berthold Rays would kill the virus."

"Why should you have?" Kirk's voice asked. "After all, Berthold Rays destroy animal tissue within 72 hours. They have no known beneficial effects."

"True enough, Captain. However, much is yet to be learned about Berthold Rays. We cannot afford to ignore the possibility."

Spock and Christine set to work immediately, feeding information on the rays into the small computer. It hummed, clicked and churred, then finally answered. The voice was an absolute purr, as if it belonged to an overly-affectionate tribble, "CONGRATULATIONS, KIDDIES. YOU JUST HIT THE JACKPOT!"

Spock and Christine simply eyed each other as a cackle of laughter came over the communicator. "Where'd you dig up such a...personable computer?"

"We did not 'dig it up', Dr. McCoy," Spock returned flatly. "However, I would like to *bury* it."

"Getting to you?" McCoy snorted. "You just don't have a sense of humor, Spock."

"Then I don't, either," Christine retorted. "I'd like to give this thing a permanent case of laryngitis."

McCoy laughed louder. "I'm at a loss for words."

"It is past time for such a miracle," Spock observed.

"All right, you three," Kirk cut in. "Enough of this. What are the specifics?"

Spock and Christine scanned the readout and both visibly relaxed as tension seemed to dissipate. The previous banter - a totally normal reaction to the good news - was simply the beginning of a let-down reaction in the humans; even the Vulcan felt it.

"Direct exposure to Berthold Rays for precisely one hour and twenty minutes will kill the virus Captain. This is within the tolerance of human tissue."

"What about side effects, Spock? After all, direct exposure without the atmosphere as a filter will be a great deal harsher than we experienced on Omicron Ceti III."

"The computer predicts no injurious effects. We do have the equipment to produce Berthold Rays. I suggest that it be assembled and beamed down along with several guinea pigs. We should experiment with them first."

"McCoy?"

"I agree, Jim. Let 'em try it on the guinea pigs first. If they pull through, Spock and Christine should be okay. This virus is a tricky thing, though. The only way to really prove or disprove the theory is to try it."

Christine added an incentive. "Captain, we've finally got a handle on this thing. At the very least, it's something to work with, and that's more than we've had before. We can't stop now."

"Then get on with it," Kirk ordered. "And good luck."

Christine gently held a black and white guinea pig, stroking it soothingly. A nervous animal, its nose seemed in constant motion and its body a mass of quivers.

"Poor things," Chris crooned. "This isn't a pretty experiment you're involved in."

"No," Spock interjected. "But it is necessary."

"In all our travels, we've never found an experimental animal which approximates our human systems better than guinea pigs. I hate this part of my work. At least, I don't have to infect as many animals as I would have had to a century ago; but causing pain and death in an innocent animal is not my idea of an enjoyable pastime."

"Nor mine. Which of those animals have negative blood?"

"This spotted one I'm holding, and the white one. The disease is dormant in them, but it is

present. The two black ones have positive blood. The disease is active within them and working precisely as it did with our landing party, though much faster."

She placed the guinea pig she was holding in a small cage with the three others. It was a closed, sterile cage, complete with its own environment. Once it was sealed, the animals could not be reinfected, for they would not be exposed to the contaminated air. The cage stood on a shielded table, and Spock closed the top, then proceeded to activate switches on an oblong box which was attached to the shield. As Berthold Rays began to bombard the shielded area, Spock said, "In fourteen minutes exactly the test will be completed."

"Fourteen minutes. We've waited so long it seems for a solution. Fourteen minutes isn't long at all to wait now."

Time seemed to drag. Finally, Spock turned off the Berthold Rays. Almost hesitantly, Chris activated the shield's monitors and four, lively, apparently healthy guinea pigs appeared on a small screen beside the cage's shield. With a jubilant cry, she began a body function check via the monitors.

"They're perfectly healthy," she finally reported. "The virus is dead, and there are no ill effects from the rays."

"Could any develop?"

"It's possible. But, it'll happen rapidly with these little fellows. By the time the crew can construct a shield cell for us - even before - we'll know if any problems arise."

Spock nodded then turned to his communicator. "Captain, the experiment with the guinea pigs is successful. The virus has been neutralized, and no side effects have developed at this stage. Please have construction begun on a shield cell suitable for Miss Chapel and myself. We will inform you if any changes occur in the meantime."

The shield cell finally arrived. It was a circular construction, and large enough to afford Christine and Spock a modicum of comfort. Two small lounges accompanied the shield cell, as well as monitors which were tied into the *Enterprise's* computers. Like the guinea pigs' cage, the shield cell contained a total, controlled environment and diagnostic equipment. The controls for the Berthold Rays were set on a panel inside the cell. Spock would be able to precisely control the amount of Berthold Rays to which they would be exposed.

When all was ready, Christine and Spock entered the shield cell, closed the door behind them, then took their places on their couches. As Christine stretched out, Spock touched the control panel by his lounge and activated the Berthold Rays. A monitor light came on, supplementing the artificial light built into the shield cell. Several monitors blinked, but there were no other indications that Berthold Rays were beating down upon them.



As Spock relaxed Christine said, "You know, of course, that this is really an experiment. This virus is exceptionally hardy. Just because this treatment worked on the guinea pigs does *not* necessarily mean that it will work on us."

"I realize this, but there is nothing else to do except try it."

"I just don't want either of us getting our hopes up too high in case this is a dud. Or maybe, I'm just trying to quell my own hopes."

"You are apprehensive?"

"Yes - to a point, anyway. If this doesn't work, in one respect we're worse off than we were before. It's been rough enough trying everything in the book - and then some - and still coming up empty-handed. But, if by some freaky chance this doesn't work and our cure is jerked away when it's almost within our grasp, it'll be the hardest blow of all."

"Logical. As long as we are indulging in speculation, what if there is no cure?"

"Then we stay here."

"Can you live with that?"

"If I have to. I certainly don't *want* to, but if I have no other choice, I will accept and adapt. And you?"

"I would do the same, of course, though I cannot imagine a more useless existence than this."

"Neither can I. I guess we're going to have to balance caution with a bit of optimism. After all, this *did* cure the guinea pigs, and it's the only promising solution we've come across."

"True enough. I still fail to understand how I missed checking Berthold Rays. In research, a scientist checks each factor by itself as well as in conjunction with related factors. I should - and do - know better. I cannot understand that oversight."

"You're just too close to the entire problem."

"That excuse may be sufficient for a human, but not a Vulcan."

"And certainly not for yourself."

As Christine completed his unspoken self-condemnation, he pinned her with a stare. She noticed it but didn't let it deter her. "You know, you're being unreasonable. You expect more from yourself than even you can sometimes deliver, then you condemn yourself for failing to do the impossible. You're not being fair to yourself, and I've seen you do that too often."

"I still should not have allowed myself to become careless."

"Maybe not. But even Vulcans aren't infallible. *Every* person makes mistakes, and being so close to a problem that you miss the obvious is not

an excuse; it's a reason. While it doesn't mitigate an error, it does explain it, and if you know the reasons behind your error, you're that much farther ahead."

Spock's stare had changed to a look of thoughtful introspection. "Perhaps you have a point," he finally conceded.

"No 'perhaps' to it. I do, and you know it. We're all imperfect. So what? It'd be a dull life if we were perfect. I simply recommend that you be more gentle with yourself."

"I shall take that recommendation under advisement."

Christine smiled tightly, then sighed. "This whole thing must be getting to both of us more than we realized. This is not the best topic of conversation under these circumstances."

"Agreed. Have you a remedy?"

"Yeah. We find something else to talk about. It's going to be a long hour and twenty minutes, and I'd rather do something besides think. My mind's tending to wander in the worst possible directions right now."

It seemed an eternity before the allotted time passed. After precisely one hour and twenty minutes of Berthold Ray treatment, Spock switched the machine off and opened the door. He and Christine exchanged apprehensive glances, then they resolutely turned to the diagnostic equipment. Chris began running a thorough check on both of them and as she read the final results, she began shaking slightly. Concerned, Spock placed a steadying hand under her elbow and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes. I'm fine. Just fine. We're both fine. It worked! The virus is dead and we're no longer carriers. We can go back to the ship any time."

A sudden cheer erupted over the open communicator, but Spock ignored it. Christine saw his reaction and placed her free hand over his, squeezed it, then drew away. "Thank you, Spock. I really am all right now. We humans tend to react strangely to good news."

He cocked an eyebrow. "There was absolutely nothing strange about your reaction, Christine. Now, I suggest we leave this nightmare world."

"And I agree. Let's go home."

Spock and Christine beamed back to the *Enterprise*. Kirk ordered remote control decontamination and retrieval of the shuttle and their equipment. His next problem was what to do about the world below them. It just was not feasible to construct an apparatus to bombard the entire planet with Berthold Rays. Instead, he asked Starfleet Command to

declare the world off-limits and place marker buoys in space to warn unsuspecting travelers of the quarantine. There was nothing else to do.

McCoy kept Spock and Christine in isolation for three days, just to make sure there were no surprises. Nothing showed up; they were quite healthy, no longer sterile, and suffering no ill effects from the Berthold Rays.

Kirk marveled, as he always did, at the way humans could perform under extreme adversity. No doubt about it, Christine and Spock had done one hell of a job despite conditions which would have totally defeated most people before they even began.

Since their return, Kirk had noticed a few changes, although they weren't really obvious. The wall of command and rank kept them at a decided distance, but they were far more relaxed around each other than they ever had been. When duty crossed their paths, they worked together without any tension and with total ease, each understanding the other without difficulty. But then, two people couldn't share the experience they had without changing. Maybe a wall of command didn't separate them after all. Instead, perhaps it was the

building block of mutual respect which kept them from encroaching on their newly-cemented relationship. And perhaps it was the bond of shared defeats and triumph which seemed to have sealed a friendship.

Kirk decided he'd have to take the matter up with McCoy sometime. Whatever, he was happy to have his two officers back. As to the rest, time might answer some of his questions.

And, on a desolate, uninhabitable, plague-ridden quarantined world, a strange thing began to happen. A virus started to mutate.

The Berthold Rays which had killed the virus in the humans began to produce a totally different effect upon the virus around the area of the shuttlecraft. It mutated rapidly, becoming genetically active, producing a new, viable, evolving life form. It was a positive life form, not only immune to the destructive organism, but capable of destroying it. While Time - the ultimate leveler - did its job of returning the world to its natural state, new life emerged...to begin again.



"Ah know it's an illusion, but it has the right effect!"

SAFE HAVEN

GINNA LA CROIX

The man standing at the end of the long table looked uncomfortable. His commander's dark eyes had been boring into him for the past several minutes and the tension was building. Finally he spoke. "He gave you no information? No reason at all for being here?"

"Only that he was on leave and he fully intended to do nothing but sleep in the sun."

The man seated at the head of the table frowned. "One of Starfleet's most illustrious officers does not come to an out of the way planet like Laun only to sleep. He must know something, or at least suspect we are here." He tapped his fingers on the table in front of him, trying to see the problem from all possible directions. The others waited in respectful silence. Finally he looked up. "Jarret, stay close to him. Let us know his every move. Be ready for elimination."

Jarret swallowed with some difficulty. He had not been with the Brondi long, but he had grown up with the stories of the Brondi and their impossible assassinations. No one had ever come close to capturing a member of the group and no outsider knew who they were or where they came from - they knew only their name. He had passed their stringent initiation with high marks and, unknown to him, the commander had marked him as a special agent, one who could be trusted to obey the most dangerous orders, and survive. This would be the first big test of his ability. Jarret was going to handle it by himself. From what he had heard about the man he was being sent to watch, Jarret would need every

bit of his skill.

The object of the Brondis' concern was just awakening. He was taking his time, deliberately holding the reality of the daylight at arm's length. On the *Enterprise* he could not allow himself the luxury of laziness; he was enjoying it to the fullest. Finally, reluctantly, he opened his eyes. Glancing at the room's chronometer, he saw he had slept a solid twelve hours. A fleeting smile crossed his lips. It had been months since he'd last managed that -- too many things had been happening recently to allow it. He was usually lucky to get half that amount. Lazily he rolled over. Now he had an entire week to sleep, seven days before the *Enterprise* would be back to pick him up.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room and was thankful that he didn't look as haggard as he had the night before. He silently thanked Spock for suggesting that he leave the *Enterprise* and spend a few days on Laun. His first officer would take the supplies to Alta VI and pick Kirk up on the way back.

Laun was a small planet, a bit off the normal travel lanes and, because of that fact, did not have a very large population. But it was beautiful; there were many lakes and woods, and the planet had almost ideal weather. Since they were passing very near to it on their course to Alta VI, it had been no trouble to divert and drop Kirk off.

McCoy had felt very smug as he watched the captain disappear in the sparkle of the transporter. He had been prepared to order medical rest leave had Kirk put up an argument, but for once he had not even murmured a protest.

It had been a conspiracy between McCoy and Spock. Kirk had been exhausted. The senior officers had been given rest leave after their ordeal on Platonius - all but Kirk. He had been appointed to the peace delegation sent to Wantu - over McCoy's protests. And the *Enterprise* had received her new orders as soon as he had returned from the long weeks of tedious, delicate negotiations.

Together Spock and McCoy had maneuvered Kirk into the Sickbay. Kirk had arrived for a drink, been treated to a physical and the results handed to him. As he sat there silently looking at the report, Spock had suggested a vacation on Laun. Kirk had agreed and as soon as he had signalled his safe arrival at his destination, the *Enterprise* had continued on her way.



The small lodge where Kirk was staying was almost empty. *Not exactly the tourist season at a highly popular resort*, he thought as he entered the dining room. The room was large, its huge windows allowing sunlight to fill the area. Just inside the door sat an elderly couple at a small table; they smiled pleasantly at him as they exchanged greetings. The only other occupants were a group of children, accompanied by two adults, in the far corner. His eyes took them in, unconsciously appreciating one of the women. He settled himself by the window and ordered a large breakfast. As he ate, he despaired over the food processors on the ship. There was no way synthetic food could come close to comparing to the real thing.

His eyes wandered back to the children. They were remarkably quiet. He smiled to himself. *Probably just obedient*, he thought. *I'm too used to Peter and his wild antics*. He became absorbed in his meal and the scenery and forgot about the others.

He was still eating when the children and their escorts left. Kirk heard a sound beside his table and glanced up. One small boy had stopped in front of him and he found himself staring into the largest, darkest eyes he had ever seen. With a start he found the eyes strangely familiar. The yearning look, half-concealed in the depths of those eyes, was the same one that he often caught in Spock's in those moments when the Vulcan thought he was not being observed. He smiled gently at the child but the expression didn't change; the dark eyes seemed to peer into his very soul.

"Tad, don't bother the gentleman."

Kirk was absorbed in looking at the boy and hadn't heard anyone approach. Looking up, he was suddenly conscious of blonde hair, bronzed skin, and amused blue eyes. He stared at her for a moment. Seeing her close up, she looked vaguely familiar although he was sure he had never met her

before. Realizing that he was staring, he flushed slightly and rose to his feet.

"He's not bothering me at all. It's been a long time since I've had a face to face objective appraisal from anyone less than a Fleet Admiral."

She laughed and he immediately decided he liked her very much. The timbre of her laugh suited the slight whisper that went with her voice. He smiled, and looked down at the boy. "Well, it seems we'll have to say goodbye." There was no response from the boy. Kirk looked up, his eyebrows lifted in an unspoken question. The girl's face sobered slightly, but she was still smiling when she spoke.

"Tad's one of our special people, and very precious to all of us." As she spoke, she put a protective arm around the small shoulders. Kirk was aware that she did not want to go further with her explanation with the boy standing there.

"That must be a very honored position. It was nice to meet you, Tad." He remained standing as the girl and small boy walked out hand in hand, Tad still not taking his eyes from Kirk until they had disappeared outside.

Their exchange did not go unnoticed. Jarret had been watching them. Seeing that Kirk was finished with his meal, Jarret slipped back to his position behind the manager's desk. He was working there quietly when Kirk strolled out of the dining room.

"Good morning, Captain. I trust you slept well."

Kirk smiled. "You weren't joking when you said it was the best room in the house. I haven't slept that well in months."

"I'm pleased to hear that, sir. Is there anything I can do to help you plan your day?"

"No. I think I'm just going to poke around. I saw from a map in my room that there are plenty of hiking trails. I think I'll just take a long walk."

"A splendid idea, sir. The woods are especially lovely this time of year."

Kirk left the lodge. As he walked down the path a faint frown crossed his face. *Something's strange here*, he thought to himself. *That man's attitude is all wrong. He's a big, sinewy person, obviously a product of intense physical training. What's he doing behind a desk? He certainly doesn't belong there. And his speech seems unnatural - forced - as if he were putting on an act. But why?* He shrugged. He was being too suspicious. It was obvious that he'd been too long without leave if hotel managers were getting to him! Still, he'd always found that his instincts should be listened to; his uncanny sixth sense had often saved him, that sense that he explained away as a "hunch". He would keep that man's name in his mind and when he got back to the *Enterprise*, he would look him up in the computer banks. *His name*

is Jerrod? No, that isn't right. It started with a 'J'. Ah, yes, Jarret; that's it, Mr. Jarret.

He turned and looked back at the lodge. It was nestled in a pine wood; the dappled sunlight accented the cosy setting and subdued architecture. The elderly couple he had met at breakfast were strolling on the lawn. Another man was sitting on a bench just outside the door in the shadows, his features not easily distinguishable from where Kirk was standing.

The man was not there by accident. Until his orders changed, the man would always be there, discreetly following, listening, watching. Kirk would do nothing, see no one, without that man knowing. He would be a second shadow.

As Kirk turned and disappeared into the woods, his shadow silently stood and followed. Jarret watched until they were long out of sight, then turned and went up the stairs to Kirk's room. He quietly let himself in and looked around.

From his years of living on Federation vessels, Kirk had learned the habit of tidiness. Everything in the room was organized, making Jarret's task of searching his belongings a great deal easier, but he found little of value. Kirk was traveling light and seemed to have nothing of interest to anyone but himself. Nevertheless, Jarret took microprints of everything, in case there was something he did not recognize that might make sense to someone else. Leaving the room exactly as he had found it, he went back downstairs to command headquarters.



Kirk was lost in the peacefulness of the woods. He had given up any thoughts of using the walk for exercise and strolled along the sun-spotted path, letting his senses drink in the tranquility of his surroundings. There was no noise, no disturbance, just the sound of the wind moving gently through the branches high above his head. Rounding a curve in the path, he came upon a small lake surrounded by rocks and trees, the sun reflecting on the slightly rippled surface, the breeze stirring the water to gentle movement. He sat on a rock by the edge of the water for a few minutes, watching the pattern of the waves as they flowed toward the shore. Finally, unable to resist, he pulled off his boots and rolled up his trousers. It had been a long time since he had paddled out in a lake and the thought was irresistible.

The water was cool and the ground gave beneath his feet like soft velvet. He found himself dancing around, splashing at the water with his hands, and laughing. He felt like a small boy again.

He saw he wasn't alone. Again, dark eyes were looking at him from the same serious face that he had found so disturbing earlier that morning. For a ridiculous moment he felt like a guilty child caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Shaking off the feeling, he returned the look.

"Hello, Tad. Are you supposed to be here by

yourself?"

No answer. Kirk smiled and waded out of the lake. Retrieving his boots, he pulled them on and rolled his pants down over them. The whole process was solemnly watched by the young boy.

"Well," said Kirk, "what do we do now? Will you take me to..." He broke off, suddenly realizing that he didn't know the name of the blonde girl who had been with Tad and had no idea where to start looking. Maybe if they went back to the lodge, the manager would know where to find her.

"Come on, let's get you back to where you belong." He held out his hand, but there was no answering move. He slowly squatted down. "We can't stay here all day. It's almost lunchtime. Aren't you getting hungry? I know I am. Why don't we go back to the lodge and get some ice cream or something? I'd like a really gooey sundae myself."

Again he held out his hand, this time without getting up. Slowly, almost like a frightened animal, Tad approached him. Kirk waited quietly while a small hand hesitantly reached out and timidly took hold of his. Again the look from the depths of those dark eyes reminded Kirk of his first officer. *What could this small child know of life that would force him so far from human contact? What would make him feel so apart?* Kirk had had little to do with children; his lifestyle had kept him away from forming the usual family unit. He wasn't sure what to do now, how to break through to find the boy under the hard surface.

He stood up slowly. Tad's grip tightened fiercely as he moved. The boy seemed to be afraid of losing Kirk once he had taken the big step of making contact. Together they turned and started back down the trail, Kirk carefully matching his strides to the small child walking beside him. He felt responsible for the little fellow and wished there was something he could do to communicate with him.



She watched them emerge from the woods, the small hand firmly clasped in the larger one. She nodded slightly to herself. Yes, the strength she had seen earlier that morning was not imagined. *This man is not afraid to be friends with a child.* She saw him look down at Tad and had an opportunity to study him more closely without his noticing.

He was plainly dressed, the dark shirt and tan pants obviously of good quality but not showing any of the extremes that were so fashionable in some parts of the galaxy. His air of quiet authority and self-assurance were subtly present, both in his movements and expression. She could sense her curiosity stirring. Who was he? Obviously he was here by himself; he had been alone at breakfast and now he had only Tad accompanying him. A slight smile crossed her face as she laughed at herself. It had been several years since she had last looked at a man as a man and not as a colleague or a patient. She wondered briefly at her feelings. She saw the man and boy drawing near, and uncon-



sciously straightened her tunic.

Kirk noticed her and changed direction. He could feel Tad starting to trail behind a bit. He smiled as he came up and she felt her heart pump in the same erratic way it had done earlier in the dining room. She returned his smile and looked at the small boy who was clinging to his knee.

"I see you've found a friend."

"He must have seen me leave the lodge, and followed me," said Kirk.

She nodded, but her mind didn't seem to register what he said. "You're the first person he's touched in over a year," she said almost to herself. Noting Kirk's look of surprise, she continued. "Tad is somewhat of a loner -- he doesn't like contact with anyone." She seemed reluctant to say anything further.

"Well," said Kirk, freeing his leg but taking Tad's hand again, "I promised him we would make contact with a very large, gooey sundae in the dining room, if that's all right. Would you like to join us?"

"It's a great idea, and I accept the invitation," she said laughing, "although I think I will stick to coffee and let you men get down to the gooey stuff." She reached for Tad's other hand but he disappeared behind Kirk's leg. Smiling an apology, Kirk led the way indoors. He was looking forward to the treat. After all, it wasn't every day he indulged in an ice cream sundae. McCoy would probably have a fit!



The shadow came in shortly after they entered the dining room. He glanced at Kirk as he passed the doorway, a frown crossing his face when he saw with whom the starship captain was sitting. Then he saw Jarret at the desk and went over.

"You saw who he's with?"

Jarret nodded. "Where did they meet?"

"Just outside the woods. He had the boy with him. They stood talking for a few minutes, then came in here." He looked toward the dining room, running a hand over his face, and turned back to Jarret. "You'd better see the commander about this. I think we're in for trouble."

Jarret looked at him for a moment, nodded, and slipped out from behind the desk. "Keep following him. I'll be back as soon as I can."



The dishes in front of them were empty. She didn't know who looked more satisfied -- the man or the boy. Finishing her coffee, she stood up. Kirk rose at the same moment and reached across the table, lightly touching her arm. "Do you have to go?"

"I'm afraid I have to take Tad back to the Compound." Seeing Kirk's crestfallen look, she relented. "But I haven't had lunch yet - and you really haven't either," she said, looking at the empty ice cream dishes. "Would you like to come with us?"

Kirk felt a small arm wrap itself around his leg. Looking down, he saw the dark eyes once again fixed on his face. Reaching down, he hoisted Tad onto his shoulders and turned to her. "I accept your invitation." Small hands clung onto his hair as they left the dining room.

The main doors were still swinging gently as they entered the lobby. By the time they made it through onto the veranda, the man was snoozing in one of the large chairs. He watched them as they moved down the stairs, then silently got up and followed them.



The Compound turned out to be an advanced center for the treatment of child disorders. They dropped Tad off at his room, or rather she peeled him off, and then she and Kirk went to lunch.

After they were seated, he looked at her with a rueful grin. "You know, I've been terribly rude. I don't even know your name."

"Nor I yours," she said. "I'm Jenny Does. My profession is medicine. I'm doing advanced studies in mental health. I'm here for a year; nine months have already passed. I like reading, swimming, and a certain amount of time to myself. I have two brothers and a sister -- no husband. My parents are retired and live on Earth. I'm the youngest, but I'm not going to tell you my age. Did I leave anything out?"

Kirk laughed. "I don't think you could have. I've rarely heard such a complete introduction." He looked at her speculatively for a few moments. "You said your name is Does. That's a pretty famous name in diplomatic circles. Would you happen to have a relative named Mark?" Her face clouded slightly for a reason he could not discern. He continued hastily. "I met a Mark Does on Wantu and you resemble him a great deal. And, before you commit yourself, I liked him."

Jenny smiled a little. "Yes, he's my brother. But you don't look much like a politician..."

Kirk's eyebrows lifted and a quiet chuckle crinkled his eyes. "No, I'm not, thank heaven. I don't think I could ever be devious enough to qualify! But you're very open for living in a political family. How do you know I'm a man of honor? I could have evil intentions."

A serious look crossed her face. "Tad trusts you. Children sense things more than adults. You're the first person he's opened himself to since he came." She threw her serious mood aside and good humor glinted from her eyes. "But I'm getting away from the introductions. I still don't know who or what you are, except that you're not

the boogie man."

"Jim Kirk. My profession is military. I'm pursuing R&R and I'm here for one week, one day of which has already passed. I like reading, chess, and..." his face softened visibly, "...an attractive woman."

She blushed but didn't drop her gaze. "Isn't Laun rather off the normal route for a week's vacation?"

"Blame my first officer. He literally pushed me out the door."

"First officer? Then you're a..." *But of course, she thought. That explains his air of authority.* She had met powerful men both in her parents' home and in her profession, and this man had many of those same qualities. But he also had a gentleness that she had never seen before in a man and found herself attracted by it.

His answer brought her back to the present. "*USS Enterprise*," he said with a grin.

"But that's a Constitution-class starship!"

Kirk nodded, his smile growing wider as he noted her confusion following her outburst. "Someone has to make sure the ship gets steered in the right direction."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't mean to sound so stupid. But, to let out a deep, dark secret, ships fascinate me. I was tempted to join the service once, but I got sidetracked into medicine. I've heard all sorts of stories about starship captains, but I've never met one before."

"And I'll bet you're disappointed to find that they're merely human."

She looked at the hazel eyes and thought to herself. *Human, maybe, but not just 'merely'.* She felt a bit foolish by the effect he was having on her -- cool, sensible Jenny. She shook herself mentally and concentrated on what Kirk was saying. He was asking about Tad.

"He arrived here about a year ago. His parents were both university professors -- brilliant people. So's Tad for that matter. -- One day he arrived at school with a note pinned to his coat saying that his parents didn't like being responsible for him, and that they had left. Tad could do what he liked with his life. He was five at the time. Apparently he had been a loving child, but not loved in return. Then this complete rejection. He withdrew into himself, and no amount of therapy seemed to do any good. He was sent here as a last resort, as are all our kids."

Kirk's face grew grim as he listened to Jenny talk. She caught a glimpse of the iron that forged his command image. His voice was quiet when he spoke, but she could sense the anger behind the words. "There can't be any excuse for anyone treating a child like that, especially his own parents!" Then a puzzled look came over his face as something she said struck him. "He's very small."

I would have thought him to be only about four."

"No, he's seven now, but he is tiny. I don't think he's grown at all in the time I've known him. But some kids do that. He'll spurt up one of these days. You probably did."

The devastating smile was back. "I'm still waiting for the last two inches. Six feet seems such a good height."

And I'll bet you could care less, she thought. Outwardly she smiled, but said nothing.

"I thought all the Dorees were in politics," said Kirk. "What brings you to Laun?"

Jenny told him of her plans to go into the diplomatic service until the day she had gone with a friend to visit a younger brother, brain-damaged, at a state institution, and how the experience had changed her life. Now her world was filled with those children who had no one else. Graduate studies had brought her to Laun where the Tolby Center was located. There were centers all through the galaxy for the treatment of child disorders, but they did not have Dr. Alex Tolby at their head. The results he achieved with mental illnesses were nothing short of phenomenal. She felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him.



When lunch was finished, they went their separate ways. Jenny went back to work, and Kirk started back to the lodge with every intention of sleeping away the afternoon.

His sense of uneasiness was back. Walking down the trail leading away from the Compound, Kirk had the feeling of being followed. Several times he stopped abruptly and was sure he saw the movement of a shadow. *Why would anyone follow me? It doesn't make sense.*

When he got back to the lodge, the main desk was empty. He ran lightly up the stairs and ducked into a dark alcove just down from his room. A lithe figure followed and went to the door of Kirk's room. He seemed to be listening for something as he stood there. From his hiding place, Kirk had a good view of him. The man seemed ordinary enough: light brown hair, plain features, medium height -- the sort of person who would make no impression on you if you glanced at him. *Why is he here? What does he want?*

The man stayed only a moment, then disappeared back the way he had come. Kirk followed him to the top of the stairs just in time to see the man disappear into Jarret's office. Thoughtfully, Kirk went to his room. He lay down on the bed to think the problem through, but the quiet surroundings and large lunch soon made themselves felt. He drifted off to sleep.



The shadows were long when he awoke. The sky was beginning to show colors of approaching sunset.

On an impulse, he went back to the lake where he had found Tad earlier in the day. He arrived in time to see the most spectacular sunset he had ever witnessed. He was caught in the wonder of nature's beauty until there were only purple streaks left in the western sky. He smiled to himself as he climbed down a bit stiffly from the rock. He would have to watch himself -- most people's image of a Starfleet Captain would not include sitting for an hour on a hard rock watching a sunset. Then, thinking of one person in particular, he doubted if it would surprise her much. As a matter of fact, Jenny would probably enjoy it as much as he had. He decided that he would invite her the next evening to find out.



"He sat on a rock for an hour doing nothing?"

Jarret shrank slightly from the scorn and disbelief in the commander's voice. "I know it sounds impossible, sir, but that's exactly what he did. He came back from the Compound at two-thirty and went straight to his room. He left again at eight-thirty and went back to the lake. He sat and didn't move for an hour. He then returned to the lodge, had dinner and went back to his room. He's been there ever since."

The commander watched Jarret carefully. There was definitely something strange going on, but so far, Kirk had done nothing to threaten them. "Continue with your duties, Jarret. Let me know only if anything unusual happens. I don't care if he sits beside a lake. I want to be told only things that are useful in discovering why he is here!"

Jarret shook a little under the blast, but answered with a carefully neutral voice. "Yes, sir, carry on with the original orders."



There was a quiet knock on Kirk's door. He was awake but loathe to do anything about it. The knock came again, this time a bit louder. He got up and grabbed his robe from the end of the bed. Opening the door, he was surprised to find Jenny and Tad. Before he had a chance to say anything, Tad had wrapped his arms around Kirk's knee. Jenny looked embarrassed at finding him still in bed.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I didn't realize you weren't up yet."

"The name's Jim, and you're not bothering me in the least. I should have been up hours ago. Come in." Detaching Tad from his leg, he stepped back and allowed Jenny to lead him into the room.

She turned to face him. "This is awfully presumptuous of me. Here you are on vacation and we've landed right in your lap. You probably have a thousand things you want to be doing right now."

Kirk smiled. "As a matter of fact, I do, and they all need the company of Tad and yourself."

She looked at him, a faint blush coloring her

bronzed skin. "I'm being purely selfish, Jim. You've touched Tad somehow and I don't want to lose that opening. Do you mind terribly?"

Kirk's face took on the soft look that had hit her so forcibly the day before. "That's not being selfish, Jenny. I'm happy to help in any way I can."

"Jim, you're a generous person..."

"Not really," he interrupted laughing. "I'd much rather have company on a vacation. It's boring having to talk to myself."

She laughed in return and he immediately thought of the previous day in the dining room. He was so comfortable with her that he seemed to have known her forever, yet they had met barely twenty-four hours earlier. His thoughts were interrupted by his knee being trapped again by small arms. Reaching down, he swung Tad high into the air. "So, Tad, looks like we're stuck with each other."

There was no answer -- no smile, no change of expression. But there was less hesitation in the large, dark eyes. Tad might not be ready to open himself to any possibility of hurt, but at least he wasn't cringing away.

Kirk excused himself and headed for the bathroom, doing his best to discourage Tad, but not succeeding. Smiling apologetically at Jenny, he shut the door behind them.

She wandered around the room, trying hard not to snoop into his belongings. He had a book on the floor beside his bed. Pick it up, she discovered it contained the works of John Donne, poet, Old Earth. Her eyebrows lifted. *There are many facets to this man*, she decided; *it would be nice to know him better*.

A short time later, Kirk and Tad reappeared. The former was freshly shaved and neatly dressed in a leisure tunic and pants that accented his muscular build. She tried not to stare. Normally she was objective about people, but something about this man made all her ethics go right out the window. She turned her attention to Tad whose face was slightly flushed.

Seeing her look, Kirk said solemnly, "We men had to shave. Tad's beard was a bit tough."

Her heart melted. To take the time to do that with a boy he hardly knew...Kirk was busy putting away some scattered belongings, and missed Jenny's speculative gaze. *This is a starship commander*, she thought, *but he's also an extraordinarily sensitive man. The two qualities are unusual. Sensitive people are so open to hurt*.

She noticed that Kirk was looking at her curiously, and she quickly brought her train of thought back to the present, burying the ever-present medical mind that so easily saw people as objects for analysis.

"Well, she said, "I've got a picnic lunch packed and know the perfect place to eat it. Why don't we go down and have some coffee, Jim, to get

you going, then the three of us will have a day of fun."

"Sounds good to me," Kirk said, lifting Tad into his arms before his knee was trapped again. "Shall we go?"



Kirk decided Jenny's choice of appealing places was perfect. The woods offered a lovely carpet of pine needles just begging to be sat upon. The waters of the small lake were lapping quietly a few feet away and the sunlight filtering through the branches made a dappled, dancing pattern on the forest floor. Disappearing behind trees, they changed into bathing suits. The water was clear and cool. Kirk paddled around on his back with Tad clinging to his shoulders. The small boy was very quiet at first, then started to give little kicks. Kirk moved to a more shallow area where he could stand and coach Tad on the finer arts of staying afloat. Jenny, having finished her swim, sat on the shore watching them. Kirk glanced her way occasionally and she shouted praise and encouragement to them both.

When Tad finally got tired, they waded in and flopped down on the blanket Jenny had spread out under the trees. The meal was a great success. She had packed all her favorite foods, and they seemed to be Kirk's, too. The swim had tired all of them; they ate in silence, an occasional smile passing between Kirk and Jenny.

Tad pressed close to Kirk's side, his sandwich clutched firmly in his hand. Its contents were in danger of slipping out so Kirk reached down to replace them. Tad pushed him away with his elbow.

Jenny smiled. "That's the first time I've seen Tad even attempt to do something for himself." The little fellow was busy trying to get the layers pushed back between the slices of bread.

"I always found peanut butter easier at that age," said Kirk.

"You're destroying all my fantasies about starship captains."

Kirk seized the opportunity. "Jenny, I want to destroy all of them. I've got something I'd like to show you tonight. Would you come out with me?"

She hesitated, not sure what he meant, then laughed at herself. "Thank you, Jim. I'd like to go out with you very much."

After lunch was finished, Jenny stretched out for a nap in the sun while Kirk took Tad exploring through the woods surrounding the lake. They paused at an outcropping of rocks which stretched into the water. Standing knee-deep in the lake, they carefully dug out one of the brightly colored stones that were native to the planet.

"Look, Tad. See how the sun catches the stone? The green looks almost like emerald."

Tad took the stone and carefully moved it, watching as the sun caused the colors to burst forth. He stood in awe for a few moments, then looked up at Kirk who was standing beside him. Their eyes held for a moment and Kirk saw a silent longing starting to grow in Tad's hesitant gaze. He reached down and ruffled the boy's hair.

"Let's see if we can find some more stones, shall we?"



The sun was low in the sky as Kirk carried Tad up the trail leading to the Compound. The small arms were wrapped around his neck, the dark head resting on Kirk's shoulder. Long, dark lashes fanned out over pale cheeks. The sleep of contented exhaustion had finally caught up with him.

Leaving Tad in the capable hands of his ward nurse, Kirk turned to Jenny. "I'll be back in fifteen minutes. First my surprise -- then dinner." Jenny nodded, amused at his eagerness, and went to change, knowing just which dress she was going to wear.



They did not speak for a long time, but sat side by side on the large, moss-covered log, watching the brilliant spray of scarlet clouds slowly turn to purple. His hand found hers and he could feel the soft warmth of her fingers curling around his own. The woods around them started to darken. He turned to her, his hazel eyes catching the fading light and looking almost green.

"Well?"

She shook her head, words somehow seeming inadequate to express what she felt. He seemed to understand for he did not press her. He stood up, gently pulling her to her feet. Blue eyes met his look head on, his question answered with no words spoken as he drew her to him. His kiss was as she had imagined it would be, so full of strength yet so gentle. She felt herself losing track of time and reality, becoming lost in emotions she hadn't known she possessed. When it ended, she was winded, her heart pounding fiercely in her chest. Jenny knew she was blushing and silently blessed the darkness.

"Come on, we're going to miss dinner." Kirk's voice didn't sound completely steady. Could it be that he was feeling the same way she was? *That's impossible. He's a man of the world, probably has a girl in every port,* she gently chided herself as they turned to walk back to the lodge. His arm came around her waist possessively and she knew she felt a little like Tad -- here was, indeed, a safe haven.



Dinner was long since over. All the conversation had been about her and her relatives, how her family had been instrumental in the governments of

many of the large planets, dating back to North America, Old Earth. She told him of the surprisingly large number who had mysteriously died. It was a grim joke in her family that a Doree either grew up and married, or went into politics and was murdered -- and so it had been for generations. She had shared with Kirk the problem of being a Doree, how it could complicate a life with the high expectations of each person's contribution. She had never discussed it with anyone before, but he seemed to understand.

They went out onto the large lawn behind the lodge. The air was full of fragrant smells and the night noises rang loudly in their ears. They sat on a stone bench at the far end of the grass and the silence stretched comfortably out between them.

Jenny found her analytical mind coming to the fore again. Jim had talked so little about himself that she wondered about it. He did not seem a shy person but an air of loneliness surrounded him, even in the peaceful setting of the lodge. He was sitting there, his mind obviously far away. *What drives him?* she wondered. *What are his values? Does he have anyone special in his life? As attractive as he is, there must be someone.*

"What are you thinking about, Jim?"

His eyes came back into focus and he looked a bit sheepish. "You probably wouldn't appreciate it if I told you."

She smiled. "I gather that I'm not the first and foremost."

"Afraid not. I was thinking about the *Enterprise*."

"Duty first? You're supposed to be on vacation. Surely your first officer can look after things for you."

"Spock? Yes, he can command, but she's my ship, my responsibility..." His voice trailed off. She didn't want to lose the moment. He was starting to talk about his life, his world, and Jenny wanted to learn all she could about it.

"Jim," she said seriously, "are you happy in what you do? Command can be such a lonely position. How do you manage?"

Kirk didn't answer and again his mind seemed to be elsewhere. She assumed he wasn't going to answer, but he said in a low voice, not looking at her, "I always wanted to be in Starfleet, Jenny, from the first time I saw ships which had come from other worlds. There's a whole galaxy out there to be explored -- a million unknown worlds waiting to be discovered. Think of it: the opportunities we have, the opportunities that have been opened to no other generation before us!"

She smiled at the boyish enthusiasm in his voice. Somehow she had suspected this side to his nature. She had sensed it lurking under the controlled surface.

"But command separates you from other people, Jim. It's a known fact in medical science that

command can destroy due to the loneliness it causes..." Her serious eyes held his and he knew her next question came from honest concern. "Are you lonely? Do you have anyone you can turn to?"

His eyes continued to hold hers. She had asked him something that he had never spoken of, something that was very special. He wasn't ready to share that part of his life with anyone. Yet he had to say something.

Kirk took a deep breath. "Am I lonely? Yes, occasionally. I think everybody is. I don't know that I'm different from the next person. Do I have anyone I can turn to?" He looked down at his folded hands. "There are two people who make my life worthwhile. Bonds are formed when people are thrust together, Jenny; when your life so often depends upon your trust of the other person. I would gladly give my life for either of them..."

He stopped talking and she almost stopped breathing. She had never heard anyone express love as a part of living. Most people would avoid such a commitment. She felt envious. Whoever those people were, they were fortunate.

Kirk ran his hand through his hair and looked at Jenny with a slightly embarrassed grin. "I'm sorry. I don't usually babble off like that -- must be the company."

Jenny got up from the bench and Kirk rose with her. She moved to face him. "Don't ever lose that love, Jim," she said. "It's part of you -- probably one of the few things that keeps you sane." Then, feeling things were getting a bit out of her control, she laughed. "Enough of this. You're here to sleep and I'm keeping you up all night. I've got to go to work tomorrow, even if you don't."

Kirk smiled and offered her his arm. They walked slowly back to the Compound. She stopped at the gate. "Goodnight, Jim. Thanks for today, and for listening to me."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Jenny? You and Tad?"

She smiled. "If you can stand us again."

"No problem." He leaned down to give her a gentle kiss, and stood at the gate to watch her move across the Compound. After she had disappeared indoors, he turned and started back to the lodge. Close behind was his ever-present shadow.



Kirk's days of sleeping in were over. As soon as Jenny would let him, Tad would be at the lodge. Each morning, Kirk would wake up to a small body hurtling through the door. Occasionally, Jenny would be with him, but more often she would leave Tad and Jim to themselves, hesitant to intrude on the special relationship that was growing between them.

Each day, Kirk found himself becoming more aware of the world around him, seeing it through the eyes of a child, being reintroduced to life in

a way he had long forgotten. He and Tad covered hours and miles -- walking, exploring, swimming, climbing...As they moved to each new adventure, Kirk would talk to Tad. He would discuss what they were doing and what they were going to do. He would point out things that Tad had never seen before and show him how they could be used. They spent a long time with Kirk's communicator, Tad listening carefully as the captain explained its function.



Jenny stood by and watched them, wise enough not to interfere. After Kirk brought Tad back to the Compound each afternoon, he would invariably wander into her office to see what she was doing. She looked forward to his coming, to have him sitting, quietly waiting for her to get finished with her day's work, or to watch him as he wandered around, leafing through the books that were piled high on the shelves. He fascinated her -- he was a man who knew his own life, who knew what he wanted, who knew where he was going. Yet he wasn't ruthless; he was a man who cared for others.

As Kirk spent his days with Tad, his nights were spent with Jenny. She brought out the wealth of tenderness he had forgotten he possessed. They made no demands of each other, they were just content in each other's company.

But the days passed too quickly. The *Enterprise* was due to arrive the next morning and Kirk was experiencing emotions he wasn't used to. As Jenny lay in his arms that night, she felt a difference. Jim seemed preoccupied. She reached up and ran her finger along the line of his jaw, her eyebrows raised. He grunted and caught hold of her finger, a tiny smile showing at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not being much of a companion, am I?" He swung out of bed, reaching for the robe on the floor beside it. She watched the movements of his lean body as he shrugged into the garment, then propped herself up on the pillows.

"What's bothering you, Jim? that you have to leave today?"

He started guiltily. He hadn't realized he had been so obvious. He turned to her and their eyes held. He seemed at a loss for words. Jenny knew that whatever was said now was important; he must not feel that he owed her anything but his friendship.

"Jim, we've discussed this before. I'm a scientist, you're a starship commander. I'm a Dores. That complicates life enough right there. You have your ship, your crew. You don't have time for anything else. However much we like each other, that's as far as it can go. We don't have time for anything else. There is no way our lives could combine without great inconvenience, and that would only cause resentment."

He looked so serious standing there that she bounced up and kissed him on the end of his nose, then sat down on the pillows, grinning impishly up

at him.

He moved to the side of the bed and took her hand. "There are few women who would say that, Jenny. You're so beautiful and so practical. It's such an extraordinary combination!"

She laughed. "It's probably because you don't get entangled with a medical mind every day."

"Well," he said, his mood lightening, "not the female medical mind anyway."

Sensing it was a good time to go, Jenny slipped off the bed. Kissing him lightly, she dressed quickly. "I'll see you before you go. I have some things to do at the Compound. Tad will be over later. Be gentle with him. I've warned him you're leaving. I don't know how he's going to take it."

After she left, Kirk tried to sleep, but eventually gave up. Dressing in his Starfleet uniform, he decided to have an early breakfast, his last meal before he faced the synthetic fare of the *Enterprise*, and probably one of McCoy's diets as well. When he finished, he decided to take a stroll around the grounds of the lodge. It promised to be another beautiful day.



"He must suspect something! That makes the third time he's gone around the lodge."

"His ship's arriving today to pick him up. Or at least that's what he said."

The commander looked at Jarret. "I think we'd better find out exactly what he knows and stop him before he learns any more."

Jarret looked worried. "Don't you think his officers will question his disappearance?"

"Plan an accident, a fatal one. You're good at that. Make sure it looks convincing, but first I want to question him. I don't like having the Federation snooping around."



Tad ran excitedly up the trail leading to the lodge. Despite Jenny's fears, he did not seem terribly upset at the prospect of Kirk's leaving. Maybe he had come out of himself more than she thought. Maybe Jim had proved to him that people did care, and that he could trust them. Tad had found a beautiful stone on his way over from the Compound. He carried it proudly, carefully, as though it were a precious gem.

He saw Kirk walking behind the lodge and turned off the trail to take a short-cut through the woods. Suddenly he stopped dead. In front of him was a man lining up the sights of a Rigelian dart gun. Tad stood frozen in horror, seeing that the gun was aimed directly at Kirk. He heard a slight ping and Kirk dropped to the ground. The man remained still for a few seconds, checking

to make sure that no one had seen Kirk fall, then moved forward, missing the small, frightened boy standing so close to him.

Jarret moved swiftly into the clearing and another man joined him, sliding out from the shadows of the building where he had been hiding. Together they picked Kirk up and carried him to the lodge. Tad sprinted into action and raced after them, close enough to see a section of the wall slide back and the two men disappear into the opening with their burden. By the time he arrived, there was only a blank wall staring at him. As he stood there, fear closed in. For a moment in eternity, he had felt the warmth of human contact and now it had been abruptly torn away from him. He was alone.



Kirk felt like his head was going to drop off; a tight band, running across his forehead, wasn't helping the throbbing very much. He was unable to move his arms or legs. He tried to open his eyes, but was hit with such a blinding light that he quickly shut them again. He knew there were other people present for he could hear them moving about, talking quietly among themselves.

Jarret looked at Kirk's naked figure strapped to the table, and turned to a slender, blond man who was working a control panel at the table's head. "He's coming around, Darney. Time to call the commander."

The other man looked up at Jarret, then glanced at Kirk. "This thing makes me sick," he muttered to no one in particular and left the room.

"Don't let the commander hear you say that," said Jarret softly to the empty space. "It's his



pride and joy."

Kirk heard the exchange but didn't understand, and didn't waste time worrying about it. He tested his bindings and discovered he was firmly strapped down; the broad bindings crossed his thighs and calves, his chest and arms. The metal he was lying on was cool to his skin, but he could feel the sweat on his face.

A voice rose above the others. "Captain Kirk?"

He opened his eyes cautiously. The light was still there, but not nearly as strong. He could make out the outline of a figure standing in the shadow behind the light, but could not see any details of the face. Kirk didn't answer. He would first try to find out why he was there. So far, nothing made sense.

"We hate to inconvenience you like this, Captain, but we really can't let you go after what you have learned here."

Kirk's expression didn't change, but his mind was working furiously. *Learn what? What is this man talking about?*

"My men have been following you. You say you're on vacation. I think differently. Evidence indicates the Federation knows that we're here and has sent you to confirm that fact. Now your ship is coming to pick you up and destroy our operation. I can't let that happen, Captain. I'm sure you can appreciate my position."

Kirk attempted a reply. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've been here on vacation..."

Searing pain shot through him. His breath whistled out of his lungs. His body tried to arch upwards but was held securely to the table by the broad straps. The pain ended as quickly as it had begun, leaving Kirk gasping for air.

The quiet voice came again. "I'm afraid I don't believe you, Captain. No one just comes to Laun -- especially Federation representatives. You'll have to come up with a better explanation than that."

He paused, but the only sound was the desperate heaving as Kirk tried to get air into his demanding lungs. A tiny smile touched the commander's lips. "I see you find your present position uncomfortable, Captain. You will find it can become worse. This set of instruments in front of me selects pain levels and has already recorded your optimum level. Cooperate, and the pain will cease. Refuse, and I can set this to kill. There will be no muscle or nerve damage, no trace of what caused death. Just a turn of the dial will put the machine on a setting slightly above what you can tolerate. Death will come slowly and with excruciating pain. Now, Captain, surely you don't want to go through that. Wouldn't it be easier to talk?"

Kirk's voice was ragged, his lungs demanding still more oxygen. "What...can...I tell...you...if

I...don't...know what you...want?"

The pain came again. Kirk tried to move his head away but it was strapped tight. He clenched his teeth to keep from crying out. He didn't know he could hurt this much. He could feel the sweat being forced out of his tightly bunched muscles.

Then...blessed relief. He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe as regularly as he could. He tried to think clearly. *What do they want? Who are they?*

"Captain," the voice said again, "it would be better for you if you would tell us what you know."

Kirk tried one last time. "But...I don't know..." His voice broke off in a gasp as the pain shot through his body.

"So be it," muttered the commander as the man in front of him twitched slightly against the tight restraints and went limp.



"I'm sorry, sir, but there is nothing more I can tell you. Captain Kirk had an early breakfast and left the lodge with no message as to where he was going."

Spock looked at the man behind the desk with a thoughtful stare. It was an easy lie, but it was a lie. The man was hiding something.

Spock had beamed down to meet Kirk, but couldn't find him. His belongings were still in his room, packed and ready to go. It was not like the captain to be late.

Spock turned away from the desk and almost bumped into a slender, blonde woman who had been standing close behind him. They faced each other momentarily.

In that brief moment, Jenny got the startling impression that she was looking at Tad. The expression in the dark eyes as the Vulcan turned away from the desk had held a glimpse of worry so like that of the boy.

The Vulcan nodded formally and went to move past her, but the Starfleet uniform caught her attention.

"You're from the *Enterprise*?" she asked. He stopped and turned back to her.

"Spock. First officer."

"Oh," she said with a tiny smile. "You're responsible for my wonderful week."

His right eyebrow lifted in a most delightful manner. Seeing his confusion she continued hurriedly, "I meant that without your encouragement Jim would never have taken that leave and I wouldn't have met him."

The Vulcan seemed to understand more than she had meant to convey in that statement. She found

herself wondering if this could be one of the people that Jim had told her about, but the man behind the desk was speaking to her and she forced her attention away from Spock.

"Commander Spock has come to meet Captain Kirk, Dr. Dores. Perhaps you have seen him."

She shook her head, concern clouding her eyes. "No, I've just come over to say goodbye. I saw him earlier this morning, but he didn't say he was going anywhere. He did seem preoccupied though..."

"Perhaps if you are familiar with his habits on this planet, Doctor," said Spock, "you would have some idea where to look for him."

Jenny looked at him, her mind working furiously. "There is one place he might go," she said. "He seemed very fond of the spot. Perhaps he went back for one last look. Come on, I'll take you there."



The pain kept washing through Kirk; his body was starting to show signs of bruising where the tight straps dug in as his muscles involuntarily tensed. He had almost forgotten what was being asked but his tormentor was relentless. The pain came again and again in great waves, forcing him to cry out in agony. Each time the same question; each time the same response to his gasping reply. When would it end?



The clearing was empty. The small lake glistened in the sunlight, the ground undisturbed by footprints. Her face fell as she looked around.

"He's not here. I was so sure he would be."

But Spock's sensitive hearing picked up a small sound. They were not alone. Motioning her to be quiet, he moved around to the other side of a large rock. Quickly, he scooped up a small figure huddled there. The boy put up no struggle but went rigid in the Vulcan's arms.

"Tad!" Jenny cried. "What are you doing here?"

Spock looked at her, the child still firmly held in his arms. "Is he not supposed to be here?"

Jenny shook her head. "No. Tad's one of my patients from the Compound -- it's a center for disturbed children. Jim's been helping me with him. The world turned against Tad at a very early age and it's only since Jim's arrival that he has started to communicate again."

She saw a strange, fleeting look come over the Vulcan's face as if he knew exactly what Kirk meant to the small child in his arms. He gently lowered Tad to the ground.

"Tad," said Jenny, "have you seen Jim?"

He would not look at her. He had withdrawn as totally into himself as he had been before Kirk's arrival. She looked at Spock. His eyes had not left Tad's face. Slowly the boy looked up at him, and Jenny saw what Kirk had seen in Tad's eyes that first time -- the yearning, the need for someone to hold onto. The same expression was present in the Vulcan's eyes as well. Two outsiders, each recognizing the other for what he was, feeling a close bond because of their differences.

Spock squatted down, his eyes level with the boy's. "Tad," he said, his deep voice more resonant, threatening to expose the inner feelings, "have you seen Jim?"

No answer.

"Tad, this is very important. Jim might need our help. Have you seen him?"

The child took a step backward, fear showing on his face. Jenny took a step toward him, but stopped when Spock raised his hand.

The silence lengthened. No one moved. Then Spock spoke again. "Only you can help him, Tad. Have you seen him?"

Tad took a deep breath and nodded.

"Where is he?"

The first step taken, the boy became a veritable whirlwind. A small hand took hold of Spock's sleeve and almost dragged him back toward the lodge. Jenny hurried along behind them, fear stabbing at her heart. What on earth could have happened to Jim?

They stopped outside a blank wall. She turned a questioning face to Spock as Tad pointed toward it. But the Vulcan seemed to take the boy seriously. Pulling out his communicator, he contacted his ship.

"Mr. Scott, I would like you to beam down a tricorder and a phaser to these coordinates. I would also like you to scan the area. Are there any life readings below the level where I am now standing?"

The puzzlement and unasked questions rang out clearly in the voice which answered, but Scott knew better than to ask. It was enough that Spock needed the information.

The requested materials arrived promptly and the information followed soon after. "Aye, Mr. Spock, there's an entire complex under you, separate from the main building. There are twenty-five people there. Do you need any help?"

"Negative at the moment, Engineer, but keep a channel open. The captain has disappeared and I suspect foul play."

"But why, Mr. Spock?"

"Unknown, Mr. Scott. But no one seems inclined to cooperate or is concerned that he is missing. I am going to investigate. If you do not

hear from me within one hour, beam down an armed party. I am sure the captain is in the immediate area; however, I do not know if he is still alive."

There was a momentary silence. Scott's voice came again, this time somewhat subdued but grim. "We'll wait one hour, Mr. Spock."

Spock turned to Jenny. "It would be best if you take the boy and go back to the Compound." He saw a stubborn look come into her eyes and felt a momentary flash of irritation -- the same irritation that came over him every time Jim Kirk insisted on doing something that was obviously foolhardy.

"Mr. Spock, I'm a doctor. If Jim's hurt he may require immediate treatment."

Spock looked at her, but she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "Very well, but please try to stay out of danger."

He lifted the tricorder and ran it over the wall. It took only a few seconds to locate the opening device. Pressure from his hand triggered it, and a section of the wall slipped back. He entered quietly, Jenny and Tad close at his heels.

Spock followed his tricorder readings, heading for the largest concentration of inhabitants. They encountered few people, and there were plenty of hiding places when others passed. The complex did not seem to be guarded, nor was there evidence of warning devices. Obviously whoever ran it did not feel threatened.

They stopped at a large junction, the corridors branching out in different directions. Spock stood looking into the distance, trying to decide on the best way to proceed, when his sensitive ears heard Kirk's cry of agony. The Vulcan froze, his stomach tying into a hard knot. The sound was repeated, and this time Jenny heard it as well. She started forward, but Spock's strong arm reached out to prevent her from moving.

"Wait," he said quietly. "If we rush in blindly we could cause him to be killed. Now at least he is alive." His voice sounded more confident than he felt. The cries unnerved him, and it was all he could do to stop himself from doing just what Jenny had tried.

Kneeling down, Spock drew Tad near. The boy's face was white, but he listened to what Spock said, and nodded. Without looking at either of them, he disappeared down the hall.

"You can't let him go off like that!" said Jenny furiously. "He'll get killed!"

"I think not."

They stood quietly, Jenny fuming inwardly at the Vulcan, and Spock listening intently for Kirk's cry. The silence lengthened. Without looking back, Spock took Jenny's arm and they crept forward.

Spock took in the entire scene at a glance. Having done a very good job of evading capture, Tad was standing in the middle of the room. Kirk was strapped to a table, unmoving, showing no apparent signs of life. Three men were with him. One Spock recognized from the main room of the lodge; the other two he had never seen before.

At that moment, Tad ducked between the two younger men and dashed out behind Spock and Jenny. There was a momentary pause as their presence registered. In that time, Spock's phaser found both Jarret and the blond man.

Suddenly a loud cry came from the tortured man on the table. The grey-haired man stood with his hands on the controls. "Move that phaser, Vulcan," he said, "and I put this machine on kill. Once I do that, Kirk is dead. Nothing can reverse the controls. You kill me, and you kill your captain as well!"

Spock stood silently, his eyes moving from the commander to his captain. Every muscle in Kirk's body was taxed to the limit, his hair soaked with sweat, his eyes tightly shut as he tried to fight the pain. The dial moved and Kirk cried out again. Blood was showing around the edges of his bindings.

"Make up your mind, Vulcan. He doesn't have long to live."

Spock laid down his phaser. The dial moved again and Kirk slumped, the desperate heaving of his chest echoing through the room as he fought for breath. Tears were running down Jenny's face as she looked at Kirk. Spock's face was unreadable. The Vulcan felt someone brush against him from behind and remove the communicator from his belt. He did not try to move either hand.

The commander pressed a button and within seconds armed guards filled the room. Spock and Jenny were pushed roughly into chairs and securely tied.

The commander noticed that Jarret was getting up groggily. "Jarret," he said, "security alert, plan C. The Vulcan's ship must be on the alert by now, or he wouldn't be here. Seal off the area and make sure everything is ready."

Jarret nodded, and moved off unsteadily. The other men stationed themselves around the room. Spock could see the odds were stacking up against them very rapidly.

The commander spoke urgently. "Where's the boy?" The guards looked mystified. "There was a boy here! Find him. He must not get out of here alive!"

Jenny's heart hit her throat. *Tad doesn't have a chance. He's led such a sheltered life that he wouldn't know these people mean to kill him.* Anger flared up as the guards pounded out of the room.

"Leave him alone," she said viciously. "He's only a boy, a sick boy. He can't hurt you!"



The commander's eyebrows rose. "Can't hurt me, eh? Possibly no more than Mark Dore's sister can hurt me. Like you, he'll be better off dead."

Spock looked at Jenny as though seeing her for the first time, but she didn't notice him. Fear was stabbing through her anger as she tried to make sense of that last remark. *How does Mark fit into this? What have we run into?*

The commander chuckled as he watched her expression change, and turned his attention to Spock. "So Kirk was lying; why else would you be here?"

"We are here," said Spock in his blandest voice, "because the captain was missing and no one seemed to know where he was, or cared."

"Um, an obvious mistake on our part. However, an accident will be conveniently arranged for all of you. And we shall be better prepared to meet your shipmates..."

A moan interrupted him and their attention was drawn to the man strapped to the table. Kirk's eyes flickered open and Spock had to steel himself against the pain which shone beneath the glazed surface. He felt his anger rising, felt the ancient hatred start to burn within himself.

The commander looked at Spock thoughtfully, knowing him to be dangerous, probably one of the most dangerous men he had ever faced. He had heard of Vulcan rage but, up to now, had never witnessed it.

Kirk's eyes seemed to be clearing. He squeezed them shut for a moment, then looked again at the end of the room.

"Spock?"

"Yes, Captain."

Jenny looked from Kirk to Spock. Each had blocked out everything in the room but the presence of the other. Neither said anything further, but the look seemed to serve, each understanding what needed to be done.

This is no ordinary relationship, thought Jenny. She glanced again at Spock and saw the burning hatred shining in his eyes as he looked at the grey-haired man across the room. A different kind of fear at his single-minded purpose and barely controlled rage ran through her. She looked back at Kirk, lying with his eyes again closed, fighting his exhaustion, and trying to control his breathing. One word from Jim -- that's all. One word would probably stop it.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the older man walking across the room. He stopped in front of the Vulcan. "Spock." He said the name speculatively. "I've heard of you." Spock's eyebrows rose slightly. "I knew a friend of yours. T'Leigt."

Spock froze. T'Leigt, the one friend of his childhood, the only one who seemed to understand the torture of his divided nature. She was being groomed as T'Pau's successor when she had been as-

sassinated by the Brondi, the elite of paid assassins. Suddenly, Spock knew who these people were and why Kirk was being tortured. They had assumed his captain knew who they were. The Vulcan's mind raced quickly. These men were highly dangerous; their respect for life, including their own, was not high.

The commander saw no change in Spock's expression, but the anger in the Vulcan's eyes died. A cold smile played around the old man's lips. The Vulcan knew where he was, knew with whom he was now dealing, and would cause no further trouble. He returned to the control panel; he hadn't finished with Kirk -- yet.



Tad had almost reached the safety of the hidden entrance. With his years of withdrawal from people he had built almost an inner radar to their presence and was well-hidden each time someone passed. His heart was hammering in his ears as he crept along; his hands were trembling so much that he was having trouble hanging on to the communicator he had taken from Spock.

The entrance was clearly visible on this side of the wall. He waited until the guard had passed, then pressed the opening device and sprinted across the lawn into the safety of the woods. He flung himself behind a fallen log and lay sobbing and gasping for air, allowing his fear to take control.

Gradually he calmed down and rubbed his arm across his eyes. He caught sight of the communicator lying where he had dropped it. Slowly he sat up and reached out for it. He had made his escape from the complex. Now it was up to him to help Jim; there was no one else.

It had been two years since he had been forced to think, to initiate action. He had given up because of the terrible hurt he had received. Everyone he had loved had left him. He didn't understand everything fully, but if he left Jim now he would be doing exactly what had been done to him. Tad accepted reality.

He looked again at the communicator. It was identical to the one that Jim had shown him a few days earlier. He pulled the grid open and heard the same funny sound that had come from Jim's. But what did he do next?

A voice came out of the communicator. "This is the *Enterprise*, Mr. Spock. Mr. Spock, is that you? Mr. Spock..."

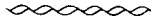
Tad stared helplessly at the communicator. He had to do something. He steeled himself and opened his mouth. "...He...h...help..."

The other voice sounded again. "Who is this? Please repeat your message."

Tears were flowing down Tad's face. He couldn't get anything out. Jim was dying, he was sure of it, and he couldn't do anything about it.

He tried again. "Hel...help..."

Another voice sounded, this time definite and firm. "Keep your communicator open. There will be an armed party beaming down to your coordinates in a few seconds."



Scott was taking a chance and he knew it, but sensors showed only one life-form at the communicator's coordinates, and it wasn't Vulcan. Something was wrong, and he wasn't going to wait around any longer.

A large contingent of *Enterprise* security personnel beamed down to the shelter of the woods. Scott and McCoy were in the first group. They were met by a small boy with a tear-stained face clutching Spock's communicator.

Gently, Scott took it from him. "Where is he, Laddie?" he asked, anxiety strong in his voice.

A trembling hand pointed toward the building in the clearing.

"That's not good enough," Scott said in exasperation.

McCoy put his hand on Scott's arm. "Go easy, Scotty. He's too upset to answer you." He looked over at the lodge. "Why don't we go over there and see what's going on."

"All right, Doctor, but I'm not going to trust anyone. Security detail, everyone in the building is to be held in detention, and I don't care if it starts a galactic incident!"

The few people in the lodge were stunned when the *Enterprise* personnel came bursting in. None of them had any idea as to the whereabouts of either Spock or Kirk. Scott ordered an exhaustive search which disclosed an entrance to the complex below. As they started to enter the stairway, Tad grabbed McCoy's arm and started tugging him in the other direction. McCoy and Scott looked at each other, then Scott turned to the others.

"Mr. Daniels, take your men and go this way. Simpson, Waters, you come with us."

Scott and McCoy accompanied Tad and the two security men around to the wall entrance. Scott ran his tricorder over the area where Tad pointed, and found the opening device. "Security, be ready. I suspect they're waiting for us."

McCoy took hold of Tad and steered him out of the way. Scott hit the device and ducked down, narrowly missing being hit by a phaser beam. A short time later, he called for McCoy and Tad to join him.

There was a maze of corridors. Tad started off but McCoy restrained him. "No, we'll go last," he said. Scott tuned his tricorder for Vulcan readings and instantly picked up Spock's location. They moved forward cautiously.

The corridors were heavily guarded and their progress was slow. Eventually they were standing

outside the room where Spock was being held.

"There's eleven people in there," whispered Scott. "We're outnumbered but I don't think we have any choice. We don't dare wait for the others to meet us."

No one objected. At his signal, they burst into the room. Confusion reigned. Strapped to the table, Kirk could do nothing to protect himself from the flying bodies which kept passing over him. Spock, with his tremendous strength and even stronger anger, tore loose from his bonds and hurled himself at the table. The commander tried to get out of the way, but escape was impossible.

Jenny was quickly freed. She leapt up, grabbing a wicked-looking pole that had been propped up in the corner. She tried to stay out of the way, knowing that she would hamper the others if she waded into the fracas, but used her weapon with vicious efficiency whenever someone got within her reach. She was rewarded by the appreciative look Spock threw her as she bashed away, and she threw a smile of triumph back at him: he hadn't made a mistake in bringing her along.

McCoy frantically loosened Kirk's bindings. He brought out his scanner and ran it over the captain. Taking out his hypo, he injected some much-needed stimulants while avoiding and sidestepping the wild melee that was being conducted throughout the room. When the larger contingent of security personnel arrived, the fight was over.

Spock gently helped Kirk to a sitting position as McCoy's scanner swept over the captain. Kirk gritted his teeth as his body moved. The pain was still quite real, even with McCoy's medication.

A small body flung itself into Kirk's arms, tears pouring down his face.

"Oh, Tad," said Kirk softly, rumpling the boy's hair. "I'm sorry you had to see this, but I'm all right."

The dark eyes looked at him, tears still brimming as a low voice said, "Jim..." He buried his face in Kirk's chest. Jenny and Kirk stared at each other -- Tad had spoken!

"You can thank that little fellow for the fact that you're alive, Captain," said Scott, beaming. "If it hadn't been for him contacting the ship, we'd still be sitting up there."

Kirk ran his hand over Tad's head. Bending down, he said softly, "Thank you, Tad. That was a very brave thing you did."

Spock appeared out of the other room carrying the captain's clothes. Kirk was suddenly conscious that he had nothing on in front of a roomful of people, and blushed. McCoy smiled; Kirk would never change.

Jenny took Tad while Spock and McCoy helped Kirk dress. As they talked quietly, she took a good look at the three, and especially Kirk in relation to them. He was a man in a man's world. It was his world, and those were his friends. She

remembered the Vulcan's reaction to Kirk in danger, saw McCoy's desperate efforts to help Kirk even while the fight was still blazing. She knew that what she had told Kirk was the truth: he had his life, and she couldn't share it. She was glad that she was able to see that he really did have people who cared for him -- and cared for him deeply.

Kirk slid off the table only to discover that his legs refused to support him. He grabbed onto Spock, but his arms felt like rubber and he would have fallen if Spock's strong arms hadn't lifted him back onto the table in one swift movement.

"Come on, you're going to sickbay," said McCoy. He signalled the ship and they were gone before Kirk had a chance to protest.

Spock and Jenny stood watching the fading sparkle, Tad still firmly held in Jenny's arms. Spock stood in silence for a few moments, reaching some conclusion within himself. He turned to Jenny. "We'll be in orbit another twenty-four hours," he said. "I believe he would appreciate it if you would come aboard and bring Tad with you."

She smiled at his quiet understanding of what she had shared with Kirk. "Thank you, Mr. Spock. Nothing would please me more."



Kirk lay savoring the familiarity of his own quarters. Jenny and Tad had just left. Kirk appreciated McCoy allowing him to be there instead of the sickbay. He still wasn't able to walk, but McCoy assured him the damage was only temporary. With therapy and adequate rest, he would regain control of his muscles. It would probably take ten days or so.

It had been good to see Jenny. He had been worried about her, about feelings which might have been more complicated than he had thought. Seeing her had reassured him that she had really meant what she had said about living her own life and letting him live his. Tad had been almost shy in his presence, a little overwhelmed by the size of the ship and its crew, but he proudly gave Kirk the colored stone that he had found the day before. He came out of himself a little when Kirk gave him the knife he had received from Elaan.

"Remember, Tad, this was given as a token of peace and friendship. Violence only hurts -- it never helps. Remember what you saw today, and remember who won."

Tad's dark eyes met the quiet hazel ones he had grown to love. Confidence was starting to show in the black depths instead of only yearning and loss. He nodded, a slight smile flickering across his face.

Kirk and Jenny watched him as he wandered off to look at the other things in Jim's quarters.

"You've done a great thing for Tad, Jim. You've made him realize he's wanted." She turned to him. "If he continues to improve, I'm seriously thinking of adopting him."

A warm smile spread across Kirk's face. He stretched out his hand and took hers in his. "Jenny," he said, "what's ahead for you now, besides Tad?"

"Well," she said, "I have three months left here to finish my fellowship. Then I'll be going back to Earth. I want to start my own center. It'll be hard at first to get it going, but there's a good possibility it'll work. Then once it gets going, who knows? I might go into politics. In a way, I think I was running from a family responsibility. Some people are born for careers; the Dorees seem destined for politics. Even the ones who get sidetracked seem to eventually find their way back." She smiled wistfully. "I suppose I'll do the same." Looking at him hopefully she went on. "You met Mark because of politics; maybe we'll meet again for the same reason..."

Kirk smiled. "We don't have to leave it to the chance of fate. I do get back to Earth occasionally. I'd like to visit you, and Tad too, if he's with you."

She nodded. "I'd like that very much, Jim." Fighting back the tears, she had leaned over and kissed him, then quickly got up and called to Tad. He'd flung his arms around Kirk's neck and hugged him tightly. Then they were gone. Kirk lay staring at the door. He had his career; she had hers. She had warned him of the difficulties of being a Doree. She accepted it and he would respect that acceptance.

The buzzer rang and Spock entered. He was pleased to see the color returning to Kirk's face, the drawn look caused by the pain fast disappearing. "Starfleet has been informed of the situation, Captain. We are to leave a contingent of security personnel here until the Federation authorities arrive. I do not think the Brondi will be bothering anyone again."

"The Brondi," repeated Kirk. "It seems so impossible. I thought they were a myth. I almost didn't believe you in sickbay. I had no idea..."

Spock nodded. "Apparently you accidentally stumbled onto their headquarters. Being a Starfleet official they assumed you knew what was going on and reasoned that you needed to be eliminated."

"Yes," said Kirk. "That would explain why I was being followed. And then I was on that table and they kept asking me what I knew. I didn't know what they were talking about..." He looked at Spock curiously. "How did you know?"

"Their leader got careless, Captain." Spock did not continue, but his eyes reflected remembered pain. Kirk didn't press him.

He tried to shift his position, and Spock was instantly at his side to assist him. Kirk smiled his thanks. "Well, Spock, since you're in temporary command, where do we go from here?"

"We are about to leave orbit, Captain. We have received orders to take some dilithium crystals to the *Lexington*. She has had an accident and needs them for repair; nothing dangerous, but she

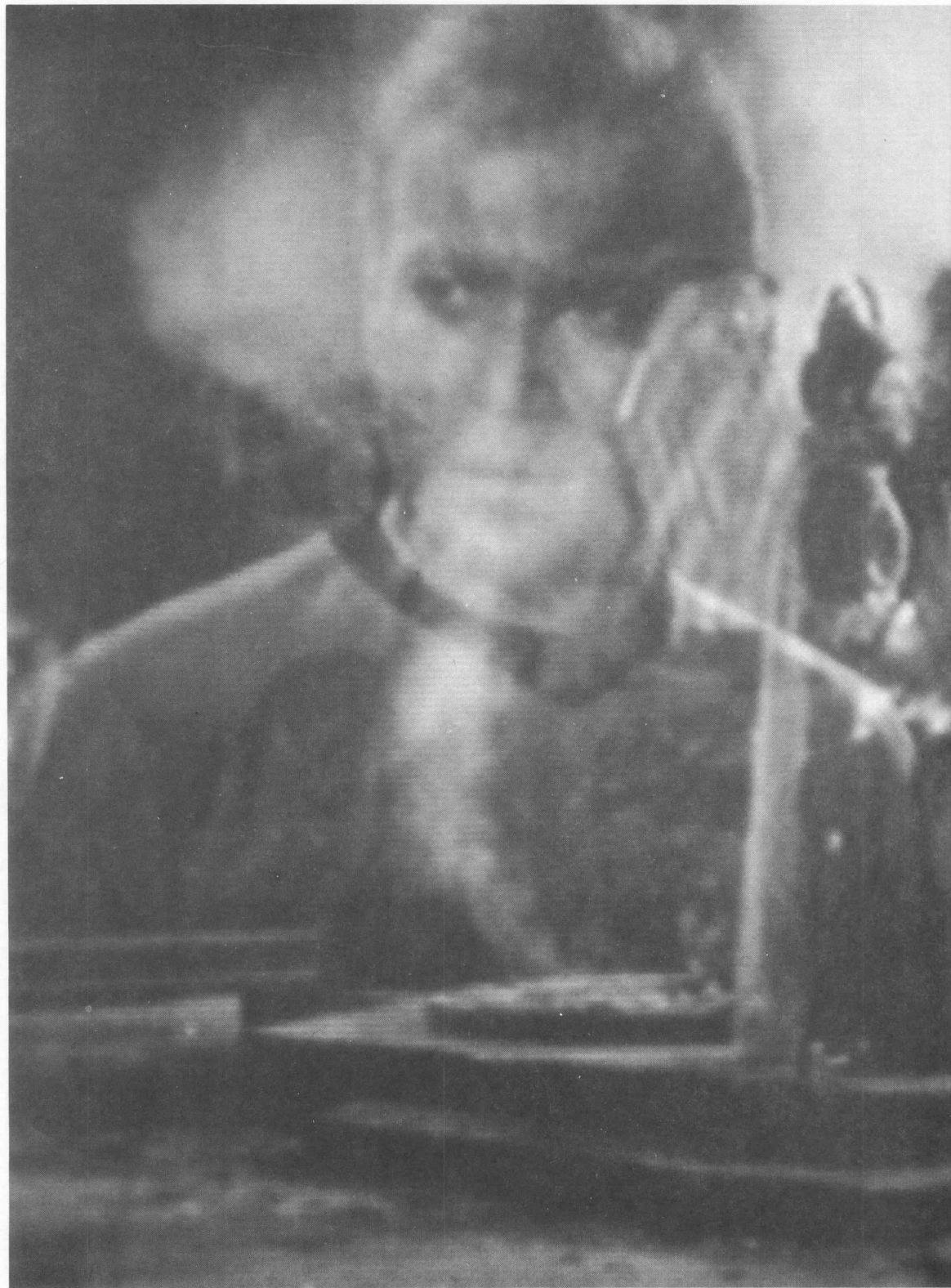
will be drifting until we arrive. The journey will take 17.5 days. I would suggest in that time that you..."

"Stop right there, Spock," said Kirk, holding up both hands. "A week ago I was tired. I admit that. I gave in to you and McCoy and took time off. McCoy has informed me that it will be at least ten days before I will be able to walk again. I think you should stop offering advice. I don't

know if I would be able to survive another 'vacation'!"

Spock's eyebrow lifted and Kirk slumped back into the pillows, chuckling at his first officer's offended expression. He knew Spock wasn't taking him seriously. Kirk was, in a way, grateful to him for some parts of the past week. He had met two people who had touched his life in a very special way and whom he would always remember.





POINT of VIEW

Martians are funny,
But humans are weird--
I tell you a chin is
No place for a beard.

Its two arms look lonely,
and close to its head.
It must be quite awkward
For hanging in bed.

Has it been injured?
Its back is so bare.
I know how I'd feel
If my parts weren't all there.

Oh, the poor human!
Its tail isn't grown!
It's not nearly as lengthy
And fine as my own.

Hey, that's not funny!
Ouch! Get it away!
I don't understand it--
What did I say?



Beverley Clark

circles

LINDA DENEROFF

Must Fate always have the last laugh?

You stand before T'Pau, eyes cast down, frozen in a fever over which you have no control. Does she see through the present to the wild nightmare of the future? Like a never-ending circle, it is the beginning of the end. The moment of decision: T'Pring chooses Stonn; I volunteer in his place when the coward flees. Somehow I will overcome my first officer safely and then we can -- I don't know any more. Had I known then?

The challenge, the acceptance, the fight -- and Death. The fever is too strong, too overwhelming -- and even though you are weakened, the blood lust drives you on. A mortal blow from a friend's hands now clenched around a lirpa. Fate replays this scene, bends it to her will, and we have no choice but to play in our assigned roles. Is there no dimension in which we all survive?

We die: I in combat, McCoy in protest of my death. Mighty Vulcan Tradition will be served. Once more we are forced into the primeval ritual.

I've lost track of the times, the permutations as the changes are rung on the dramatis personae. And yet it is always the same. And so it shall ever be. I am/was/will be my brother's keeper, Spock, and must watch over thee all the days of Eternity.

And Fate has the last laugh.

RITE of PASSAGE Sandy Hall

INTRODUCTION

War brings many changes to those involved. In a time of great uncertainty, insecurity and opportunity, marching through the fires of war has caused many awkward adolescents to rapidly mature into responsible and dutiful adults, ready to take their places in society - if they are fortunate enough to survive the learning process.

Star Wars is the story of Luke Skywalker's transformation from gangly farmboy to hotshot space jockey and budding Jedi Knight through the fortuitous circumstance of a battle against the Galactic Empire. Luke successfully carries out his tasks of destroying the Death Star, growing up and rescuing Princess Leia (not necessarily in that order).

"Rite of Passage" is also a story of maturation in the Star Wars universe. It is the story of a young girl growing up under the difficult conditions of interstellar war, a war which has robbed her of her father's guidance and instruction. This young girl and her companion undertake a dangerous and heroic task, attempting to clear the girl's family name of the charge of failure.

Will they accomplish their task? How? And at what price?

"Rite of Passage" endeavors to answer these questions.

A permanent grey fog blanketed the grounds of the Dark Lord College on the planet Gorla. Twisted and blackened tree stumps jutted randomly toward the sickly yellow sky. Slippery green, slimy moss decorated the landscape. Students in their grey cloaks blended with the omnipresent gloom, entering and leaving the blood red university buildings, intent on their studies of murder, mayhem and malignancy. An occasional black cloud signaled the passing of an instructor or visiting alumnus.

Deep within the bowels of the Malodor Recreation Center, a young girl stood, angry and confused.

"It isn't fair," Evilla May Vader said disgustedly. "It just isn't fair!"

"It certainly isn't," agreed her droid, C-4UR.

"Shut up," ordered Evilla May. "Fritz, they took Gully Suttle and I'm just as good an evil a person as he is!"

"Yes, I think you are," answered Fritz Cher, the other occupant of the Droid Hobby Shop within the Center. Fritz was a native of Kapona, the only human planet able to compete on the same high level of treachery as the Sith. Fritz had won a scholarship to the Dark Lord College for his all-around excellence in dishonor, deception and vice.

At the moment, the short, squat human was re-programming a rusty antique droid. He continued, "But the Dean is only letting honor students help in the destruction of the rebellion against the Empire."

"Yeah!" C-4UR sneered at Evilla May. "If *you* hadn't failed 'Joys of Massacre', we would have been able to share in the glorious and bloody battle against the rebels!"

"Shut up," said Evilla May. "It's not my fault, Fritz. Those stuffy old teachers have it in for me because of Daddy. He couldn't help it if that idiot, Tarkin, let the Death Star be blown up. The Emperor had no right to say all those terrible things about our family!"

"Maybe not," Fritz declared, "but what can you do about it?" His skilled hands worked over the controls of the ancient droid.

"Not a single blasted thing!" C-4UR cried dramatically. "It's a disgrace to be your droid, Evilla May! Turn me off! I want to die!"

"Shut up," Evilla May said absently. "I've been thinking about it, Fritz, and maybe there *is* something I can do. I've got my own spaceship. I could ambush some rebels, do some sabotage or something."

"It would have to be a lot of sabotage to square your father with the Emperor," scoffed C-4UR.

"Shut up," Fritz said. "He's right, Evilla May. It's going to take a lot more than a little bit of ship sabotage."

"Why don't we do something really daring?"

C-4UR suggested. "Let's go after the people who blew up the Death Star."

"That's a very good idea," said Evilla May. "I'm glad I thought of it. What do you think, Fritz?"

The human whistled in admiration. "That's a brilliant idea, Evilla May! But the rebels have moved their base by now. How are you going to find them?"

"It won't be easy," she admitted.

"You can say that again," snickered C-4UR. "When do we get started?"

"Shut up," said Evilla May. "You can't go. The Dean of Security had that homing device installed in you. If this is going to be a secret trip, you'll have to stay here and keep the instructors thinking I'm still around."

"But who's going to help you pilot the ship? Who's going to help you interrogate prisoners? Who's going to help you..."

"Shut up."

"But who's..."

"Shut up, or I'll short out your brain circuits, melt you down and use you as a doorstop. You *can* be replaced, you know, by a younger and smarter droid."

"Oh, all right," C-4UR gave in gracefully.

Suddenly Evilla May's eyes lit up. "Why don't you come with me, Fritz? I need someone to help me pilot the ship and interrogate possible prisoners. Come on! It'll be more fun than the Junior Pogrom!"

Fritz considered the idea as he finished up on the droid. "All right," he decided. "I'm failing my guerilla warfare class anyway. Old Prof Lathel said I need to submit a good special project or I won't get a passing grade."

"That's terrible," Evilla May sympathized.

"This trip will make a good special project though," Fritz assured her as he made the final adjustments to the droid's circuits and closed its chest cavity.

Curious, Evilla May asked, "What did you do to it?"

"Made it into a time bomb."

"Oh. Who for?"

"Professor Lathel. It probably won't get through his defenses, but it'll do some damage... and there's always a chance."

Evilla May nodded admiringly. She was very glad to have Fritz as a friend. He was the only one at the college who hadn't snubbed her after the disgrace of her father living through the rebel

attack.

The antique droid stood up and marched out. "When do we start?" asked Fritz.

"I want to do a little research first," explained Evilla May, "to find out what we're up against. We'll leave tonight. Around midnight?"

"Fine with me."

"How am I supposed to keep the Dean from finding out you're gone?" asked C-4UR.

"That's *your* problem," Evilla May grinned. "Tell them Fritz and I are involved in secret research here in the hobby shop, then lock the door and don't let anyone in. Fritz and I will be back in a few weeks or so."

"That's not funny," sniffed C-4UR.

"Doorstop," mused Evilla May, "or maybe a paperweight."

"I'll think of something," the droid promised.

As planned, Evilla May's spaceship, the *Epoch Vulture*, took off at midnight. The *Vulture* was a Class D destroyer with room for six prisoners and a two-man crew. Fritz had made some modifications to the standard equipment. The *Vulture* was far faster and deadlier than her name even suggested.

"As I see it, there are four parts to our problem," Evilla May said, once they were safely away from Gorla. "First, we have to find the rebel base; second, we have to infiltrate it undetected; third, actually eliminate the leading rebels; then we have to get off the base. I can use the Dark Side of the Force to affect the rebel warning devices so they won't know the *Vulture* is there, but I can only hold it for about 48 hours. That gives us a day and a half to get in, do the job, and get off."

"Sounds fine to me," Fritz said. "How do we find the new rebel base?"

"That's the hard part. I know someone on the planet Macaroine who might be able to help us. He knows every rebel sympathizer in three star systems. He'll tell me where to find one who will then tell us where the base is located - for the right price, or threat, naturally."

"Let's use torture," Fritz urged. "Bribery is so boring."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll set course for Macaroine."

"You haven't told me what you found out about the rebels," Fritz reminded her after they were on course. "I know about Senator Organa, but who are the others?"

"There're six we will have to take care of," answered Evilla May. "A kid named Luke Skywalker,

who shouldn't be much of a problem. Since Daddy got rid of Kenobi, this Skywalker is the closest thing the rebels have to a Jedi Knight. The Force is with him, but he has almost no idea how to control it."

"Some Jedi Knight!" Fritz snickered.

"He's the one who blew up the Death Star," Evilla May cautioned. "He's also been practicing with his light saber."

"I'll take him," offered Fritz. "No problem."

"Shouldn't I fight him?" she protested. "After all, *he* is the one who was actually responsible for the Death Star's destruction."

"Hey, that's right. That means I get Princess Leia," leered Fritz.

"This is a business trip, Fritz. We don't have time to mess around."

"Well - maybe you'd better take Leia. I might not be able to resist."

"All right, you get Skywalker and I take Leia. I suppose it doesn't matter as long as both of them are eliminated. There's also a guy called Han Solo. He's a smuggler who just recently got mixed up with the rebels. He's mine. His ship prevented Daddy from saving the Death Star."

"Fine with me," the human shrugged.

"This Solo has a wookiee first mate," Evilla May continued.

"Wookiees are easy," Fritz remarked, "with that baldness phobia of theirs."

"I'll take care of him along with Solo," promised Evilla May.

"That gives you three!" protested Fritz.

"Skywalker has a couple of droids," Evilla May told him. "A C-3PO and an R2-D2. When you blast Skywalker, you can blast the droids, too."

"Aw, blasting droids isn't any fun!"

"Well, use a little imagination," Evilla May declared. "Space them or scrap them, or something."

"I know!" Fritz cried. "I'll kidnap them and make them my assistants. They'll have to do what I tell them. Can you think of any greater punishment for two rebel droids?"

"A lovely idea," Evilla May beamed. "You always come up with the best notions."

Fritz smiled modestly.

Evilla May's contact on Macaroine was the owner of Ye Old Skye Blue Teae Roome, a human named

Lucs Gross. Fritz guarded the *Vulture*.

The Teae Roome was crowded. Little old ladies of many races filled the room with grandmotherly boasting of the talents of their grandchildren. Evilla May carried her light saber in her hand and her blaster loose in its holster. The Teae Roome had been known to be a little dangerous. Unchallenged, the Sith girl stepped up to the counter and waited to catch Gross' eye.

A sudden tension in the air caught her attention. Evilla May turned warily to see a white-haired human and an ancient Mydellian confronting each other over a pile of holos. With a quick movement of her upper right hand, the Mydellian overturned the table, scattering the holos on the floor.

"Why, you carrot-faced vegetable brain!" screeched the human.

The Mydellian screeched back in her own language.

"You'd better take cover, dearie," advised a little old lady on Evilla May's right. "They're gonna start blasting any second now."

"Thanks." Everyone in the Teae Roome was on his feet and drawing blasters. She grimaced as she pushed her way through the excited crowd. A loud explosion and an outburst of cheering signalled the beginning of the battle. Evilla May rolled to safety behind the shielded counter.

Lucs Gross was there, counting the day's receipts. "Why, hello there, Evilla May," the huge man grinned. He was an old friend of her father's and had known Evilla May since she was a little girl.

"Hi, Mr. Gross," she answered. "How are you?"

A blaster bolt hit the wall behind them, vaporizing the automatic lemon squeezer.

"I'm fine," said Gross, counting credits under his breath. "How are you and your daddy?"

"Oh, we're all fine. Daddy's a little busy right now with the rebellion, so I haven't seen him much lately."

The Mydellian flew over the counter, landed on the floor, then was dragged out by someone at the other end.

"Tch, tch," Gross clucked. "Those rebels! Always up to something!"

"What I came to ask you about, Mr. Gross," began Evilla May, but she was interrupted by loud screams of rage and fury coming from outside the Teae Roome.

Lucs Gross chuckled. "That'll be the teachers from the Sunny Smile Nursery School finding out they missed most of the fight."

"What I came to find out, Mr. Gross," Evilla May began again, "is the location of any rebel

spies on Macaroine. I need to find their new base."

There were renewed sounds of destruction as the Sunny Smile Nursery School teachers added their efforts to the fray.

Gross became thoughtful. "Well, there's a fellow by the name of Tholy Canon on Shyster Street. I was saving him for the next Lynching Week festivities, but seeing as how you need him now...."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Gross! I don't know how I can repay you."

"Just try not to damage him too much, Evilla May. I still might be able to use him. And remember me to your daddy when you see him."

"I will, Mr. Gross. Thanks again." Evilla May stood up and drew her blaster in preparation for fighting her way to the entrance.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Gross said. He, too, stood up.

"TIME OUT!" he roared.

Slowly the battle stopped. Blaster fire became sporadic, then ceased completely. "Thank you, Mr. Gross," said Evilla May. She walked around the end of the counter, stepping over unconscious bodies, broken furniture, and disconnected limbs. As she left the Teae Roome, she could hear the sounds of explosions as the struggle resumed.

Fritz won the credit toss to get information out of Tholy Canon. While he was gone, Evilla May occupied herself with a detailed rundown of the *Vulture*'s weapons system. As time wore on, however, and Fritz did not return, she became worried. The rebel might have had better defenses than Fritz was prepared for. She doubted that he would have any *real* problem, but still...

Several moments later she was relieved to see Fritz enter the docking bay.

"What took you so long?" she exclaimed.

Fritz grinned. "Canon was a little uncooperative."

"Did you get the location of the rebel base?"

"Well, I asked him, and he said he didn't know. Kept saying he didn't know until I used the mind probe to tear his brain apart - and what do you know? He was right!!"

"Oh, dinglyfeathers!" Evilla May cried in disappointment. "How are we going to find the rebel base now? I'll *never* clear Daddy's name!"

"Take it easy," said Fritz. "We're not licked yet. There's still the old button question."

"Button question?"

"Yeah, you know. To find a lost button you just ask yourself, if you were a button, where would you be? So if you were a secret rebel base, where would you be?"

"Sittenduckt," she answered promptly. "But that's silly. It couldn't be that easy!"

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to go find out," Fritz said.

"Oh, all right," Evilla May answered grudgingly, "but it's going to be a waste of time."

On the planet Sittenduckt, Princess and former Senator Leia Organa was drafting another denunciation of the Empire. The large room she worked in was also occupied by two quarreling, bickering, arguing men.

"Look, kid," the dark man growled. "I'm taking Leia to dinner tonight!"

"Oh no, you're not, Han!" snorted the blond one. "I'm taking Leia to dinner tonight, *and* I'm taking her for a walk in the garden, too."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Gentlemen!" the object of their affections said sternly. "There's a war going on!"

"You bet there is!" declared the one called Han, glaring at the one called Kid.

"I mean the Rebellion," said Leia impatiently. "We don't have time for dinners or walks in the garden. I've got to finish this speech. Han, you're supposed to be helping repair the damaged ships. Luke, you're supposed to be practicing your light saber."

"I know who I'd *like* to practice on," Luke muttered darkly.

"Threatening me again, huh," taunted Han. "You couldn't scare the daylights out of a winter night! You couldn't..."

"GENTLEMEN!" Leia interrupted loudly. "For the past three weeks all you two have done is argue and fight. I have had *enough*. If you don't get out of here right now and let me do my work in peace, I'll have General Dodonna arrest you both and confine you to the brig for the next six years, heroes or no heroes!"

Luke looked cautiously at Han. "Do you think she means it?" he whispered.

"GET OUT OF HERE!"

"I think she means it," Han whispered back as the two beat a hasty retreat.

The *Epoch Vulture* landed a mile from the base, undetected by the rebel defenses. "I still don't believe it," Evilla May said, looking at the planet through the viewscreen.

"Don't look a gift rebel base in the mouth," advised Fritz. "What do we do first?"

"Let's get on the base first. Then I'll go after the wookiee and Solo and the princess. You get the droids and Skywalker, and we'll meet back here in, say, four hours. That should give us enough time to do the job right. Let's synchronize our watches."

"Okay," Fritz grinned. "Last one back is a rebel sympathizer!"

The two droids owned by Luke Skywalker, C-3PO and R2-D2, were standing near the wall of a large hall designated as the Light Saber Training Area. The room was deserted, except for Luke who was standing in the room's center, a blast shield over his face, light saber gleaming. A seeker globe darted swiftly around him.

C-3PO turned to look at his counterpart in response to a question asked in R2's mechanical dialect.

"No, I don't know to whom Master Luke is speaking, R2. He is not addressing either of us, and there are no other persons in this room."

Another series of beeps from the small droid.

"Yes, I know it's considered strange for humans to speak aloud when there is no one else present, but it is none of our business, R2."

More beeps.

"I don't want to belong to a crazy master any more than you do, R2, but he *is* our master, and there is nothing we can do about it. Now be quiet."

Oblivious to the droids' concern, Luke Skywalker concentrated on his own problems. "Obi-wan, I'm getting nowhere with Leia," he said to thin air. "It's all Han's fault. He's dazzled her, blinded her to *my* good qualities."

"Cease your eternal yapping about Leia and watch the remote!" a sharp voice seemed to come from nowhere.

Luke parried a sudden crackle of energy from the circling machine. "But, Obi-wan," he protested, "I love Leia! Han's no good for her. He'll use her, then cast her aside. How can I make her see that?"

"I'm not Dear Abby!" snapped the voice. "Pay attention to your practice."

Luke abruptly switched off his saber. "Obi-wan, you've got to help me. Han is older, more

exciting. He's a smuggler, an adventurer, ready for anything he's not already done."

"Look, Luke," the voice said, striving to remain patient, "I'm supposed to train you to be a Jedi Knight, not advise you on your love life. You've got to start concentrating on your work!"

"I know, Obi-wan," Luke said dejectedly, "but I just can't get Leia off my mind. I guess I can't really blame her for being attracted to Han's air of light depravity instead of my wholesome good looks. But how can I compete with him? If I could just be a little bit immoral..."

"Bite your tongue!" the voice admonished angrily. "You're a Jedi Knight, Luke. The Jedi are good, kind, virtuous, dutiful, noble, trustworthy, thrifty, clean, reverent, brave..."

"And boring," Luke added under his breath.

"There has never been an immoral Jedi in history." The voice thundered on, "Not since the dawn of our beginning has a Jedi forsaken the true religion to lower himself to..."

"What about Darth Vader?" Luke interrupted.

"Doesn't count. Sith blood, you know. I'm talking about the *real* Jedi, the human Jedi."

"Oh." Luke went back to the important problem. "What am I going to do about Han and Leia?"

"If your problems with Leia continue to interfere with your training," warned the voice, "I'm afraid you're going to have to choose between the princess and the Jedi."

"Well, it's been nice knowing you, Obi-wan," Luke said.

A bolt of lightning struck the floor six inches from the defiant Jedi. Luke burst out hastily, "I was only joking, Obi-wan! Ha-ha! You know me and my crazy sense of humor. Ha-ha-ha!"

A sigh echoed through the hall. "Mother told me there'd be days like this," muttered the voice. "I'm supposed to restore the Golden Age of the Jedi and look what I'm given to work with."

"Aw, Obi-wan!" Luke protested.

"Get on with your practice, Luke, before I forget you're the last hope of the Jedi."

Evilla May and Fritz slipped easily into the rebel base. The uprising humans were still excited over their victories against the Empire and inclined to think of themselves as slightly invincible. The guards were widely spaced and lax at their posts as they discussed past glories and planned new liberty forays.

Once inside the base proper, Fritz found a spare uniform for a disguise. The rebel who'd been wearing it didn't need it any more. Evilla May, as

a Sith, was impossible to camouflage. She had to depend on her skill with the Force to cloud rebel minds so that they would not perceive her presence. The two friends split up to find their separate opponents.

After a little searching, Evilla May located the building where Han Solo's ship was berthed. There was no one around, but she boarded the spaceship cautiously. There were a few adjustments she had to make.

Over dinner, Chewbacca, the wookiee, was listening patiently to his partner's muttered complaints about Luke Skywalker.

"He's just a show-off farmboy," Han grumbled. "He's no good for Leia. He's got sand in his veins instead of blood."

Chewbacca growled agreeably and continued to stuff himself. It took a lot of protein to keep his huge body healthy; he never passed up a chance for chow.

Han Solo, on the other hand, wasn't eating. He was steadily and methodically getting drunk. "Leia deserves better than a juvenile kid who's only claim to fame is the destruction of the Empire's ultimate weapon. Leia needs someone like me: handsome, brave, and experienced."

Chewbacca reserved judgment.

Han suddenly banged his bottle on the table. "He thinks he's so great because he blew up the Death Star!" the smuggler bellowed. "Well, if I hadn't knocked out Vader and those TIE fighters, Mr. Luke Hot Jet Space Pilot's atoms would have been spread all over the galaxy, and then where would he have been? Answer me that, Chewie?"

The wookiee shrugged and returned to his eating as Han resumed his favorite subject, Luke's unfitness for Leia. To Chewbacca's experienced eye, his partner was almost ready to be carried back to the *Falcon* to sleep it off.

"It's a disgrah!" the human cried. "That kid's too young and inexperienced to marry a princess. I'll bet he's never even..." Han stopped abruptly; his face went blank and he slid down his chair onto the floor, snoring gently.

Chewbacca leisurely finished his meal, then carefully picked up his sleeping partner to deliver him to the *Falcon*, and bed.

Evilla May first found the cabin belonging to the wookiee. Her preparations there finished, she used the Force to go over the rest of the ship.

She heard footsteps. Quickly Evilla May hid herself in a recess in a bulkhead near the entrance of the ship. She held her breath as a wookiee carrying a man she assumed to be Han Solo came on

board. Fortunately, the wookiee headed in another direction, away from Evilla May's hiding place. She grinned in delight as she thought of the surprises awaiting them. When the wookiee had disappeared from view, she ran quietly down the ramp on her way to find Princess Leia.

By the simple procedure of asking a passerby, Fritz discovered that Skywalker was in the saber-training room. The unsuspecting and polite rebel gave clear and complete directions on how to reach the hall. Fritz thanked her courteously.

Luke Skywalker was having problems. In his anxiety over Han Solo's assumed advantage for Princess Leia's favors, the young Jedi could not concentrate on the seeker, thereby earning himself shock after shock. Obi-wan was not too happy with the boy's progress either, and said so loudly and fluently. All in all, Luke was feeling pretty sorry for himself. "Ouch!" he yelped.

"I told you," the voice of Obi-wan grumbled. "I've been telling you for weeks now. If I could quit..."

"Ouch!" Luke shouted.

Fritz found the hall without trouble. It was empty except for a young blond man and two droids. The young man was waving a light saber around and talking to himself. Fritz quietly walked up to the droids. "Take a walk," he ordered. "I want to talk privately with your master. Stay in the area, though. I'll want to talk to you two after I finish with him."

The little droid beeped. The 3PO unit said sharply, "You watch your language, R2. This gentleman wishes to speak with Master Luke. It's none of our business who he is." C-3PO turned to Fritz, "Please excuse my partner, sir. He is only an R2 model, and therefore does not have the judgment circuits of the higher droids. He does the best he can with what he has, little though it is." R2 made a rude noise.

"Take a walk," Fritz repeated.

"Come on, R2," the taller droid said. They went out the door, the R2 beeping complainingly and the 3PO arguing back.

Fritz turned and advanced quietly until he was quite close to the blond man. "Are you Luke Skywalker?" he asked.

"Yeah. What do you want?" he answered brusquely.

Fritz stayed beyond the reach of the wildly swinging light saber. "I just wanted to be sure," he said. Fritz drew his blaster and opened fire.

The saber dropped to the floor and began burning a hole through the linoleum. Fritz coughed his way through the smoke to inspect the body.

There was none. A pile of cast-off clothes were all that remained of Luke Skywalker. Fritz looked around suspiciously. He was certain he had blasted the boy, yet there was no sign of a body. Shrugging, the human decided it must be some Force-y thing. He would have to ask Evilla May about it later. Now he had some droids to talk to. Fritz left the room.

"Hey, what happened?" cried a startled voice.

"You blasted fool!" groaned the voice of Obi-wan. "Now look what you've done!"

"What did I do?" asked the voice of the former Luke Skywalker.

"You let that boy use a blaster on you," the older voice said, "and you know what happens when that happens."

"Yeah, but how did I get here? How come I'm not, uh, dead?"

"Because you were in contact with me," Obi-wan explained quietly, dangerously quiet. "You used your power with the Force to propel yourself to this existence plane, following the path of my power that I was using to speak to you."

"Well, what happens now?" Luke asked impatiently. "I've got to get back to Leia before Han..."

"Don't you realize what you've done?!" Obi-wan exploded, ignoring Luke's question. "You were the last hope of the Jedi. You were to be the leader of a new generation of Jedi Knights. And what did you do? You let yourself get blasted out of physical existence by a singly paltry little human. You've ruined all the hopes of the Jedi, Luke, and you're going to have all eternity to think about it."

"But..." Luke tried to interrupt.

"There are some people here who'd like to meet you," continued Obi-wan. "All the Jedi who've managed to reach this plane. They'd like to talk to you about your 'accident'."

"But it wasn't my fault," Luke protested. "It was an accident. It could have happened to anyone."

"Don't get so excited, boy," said a new voice. "After all, we've got all the time in the galaxy to argue about it. You're going to be here for a long time. We're all going to be here for a long time."

"A very long time," sighed Obi-wan.

Chewbacca was also having problems. He had lain down on his own bunk after depositing Han in his, but the wookiee had only been dozing for a short time when he began to feel an odd prickly sensation. There seemed to be many ticklings all over his body. With an apprehensive growl, Chewbacca rolled over and rose from his bed. His shriek of rage and fear echoed throughout the *Millennium Falcon*.

Han Solo was rudely awakened by what seemed to be the screeching of a thousand Rur banshees, or one terrified wookiee. There was only one thing which could scare the hairy behemoth like that. Han laboriously sat up in his bunk, wasting no time wondering how he'd gotten there. Holding his pain-filled head, he attempted to stand. The bed collapsed beneath him.

The smuggler had no time to spare for investigating the breakdown of his supposedly solid bunk. He had to stop that howling before his head exploded. Han stumbled down the corridor to Chewbacca's cabin. In his preoccupation he didn't notice a peculiar brick-red color staining the shining metal walls and fixtures of the *Falcon*.

Han burst into the cabin, profane abuse uppermost in his tormented mind, and was brought up speechless by the sight of a totally hairless wookiee.

Princess Leia was having problems with her speech. She had had no chance to save any of her possessions aboard Captain Antilles' ship, and so had lost her favorite thesaurus. There were only so many ways she could think of to curse the Empire without using any of the many taboo words of the language. With a decisive snap, Leia threw down her pen. She was hungry. Further vilification of the Empire could wait.

The former senator from Alderaan stood up and stretched leisurely, then looked around guiltily to see if anyone had seen her unregal-like behavior. Startled, the princess realized that she had indeed been observed. There was a young Sith girl standing in the shadows of the room, a light saber ready in her hand.

"And now, Princess Leia," said Evilla May, we will see if you can escape *this* member of the Vader family."

Han Solo was having problems. His attempts to comfort his ailing first mate had met with no success. The wookiee's worst nightmare had come true. He had lost his thick protective covering and stood naked before the universe. The depilation of his all-encompassing fur had destroyed the wookiee's self-confidence. Chewbacca was scared, embarrassed, and self-conscious. Han was openly envious.

"I'd better get you something to wear," the human decided finally. "You can't walk around like that. You'll catch cold or something. I got to get

you to a doctor." Solo left for his cabin.

Chewbacca waited fearfully for his friend to return. His wait grew longer and, at last, it penetrated the wookiee's self-absorption that Han had been gone quite a while. Cautiously, Chewbacca stood up to go look for his friend. The deck caved in under him, and he fell into the storage hold. Han was already there.

"There's something suspicious going on here," declared Solo. "First your fur falls out and now the *Falcon* is falling apart." Suddenly he realized what he'd said. "The *Falcon* is falling apart!" he cried. "My ship is falling to pieces! My poor baby is rusting!"

Chewbacca whined quietly of his own problem.

"Who *cares* about your lousy old fur?!" demanded the heartsick human. "How can you bother me with petty details like that when my ship is breathing her last? My ship is dying, you denuded carpet!"

"It is in times like this," Chewbacca said reflectively, "that you find out who your real friends are." The wookiee was beginning to calm down and look at his predicament objectively. To his mind, there was one person who would know how to help him, Princess Leia. Chewbacca stood up and carefully made his way out of the *Millennium Falcon*, leaving Han Solo hovering protectively over the corroded engines, vainly crooning encouraging words to the disintegrating machines.

Fritz was having problems with the droids. "All right, I'll explain it again," he said for the fifth time. "I just bought you two droids from Luke Skywalker. You're mine now and that means you have to do what I tell you."

"I am well aware of the duty of a droid toward its master," sniffed C-3P0. "There is no need to remind me. My memory circuits are still quite good, outdated as they are. I simply wish to know why Master Luke sold us. If I have been remiss in my droidly duties, I must know so that I may correct my deficiencies. All my former masters have been pleased with my services. I can conceive of no reason why Master Luke would wish to be rid of me. If I have displeased him in any way, I would gladly apologize and try to..."

"You didn't do *anything* wrong," Fritz interrupted desperately. "I just offered to buy you, and Skywalker needed the money. That's all there is to it. Now will you shut up?"

"Of course," agreed 3P0. "I have always obeyed the orders of my masters, unlike some others I could name." R2 beeped indignantly. "But are you quite sure, sir," C-3P0 continued, "that there were no complaints about my services? It is very important to us droids to know that we are giving complete satisfaction to our masters. It is a matter of pride with us, sir. I have been in service quite a few years now and I can assure you that I have done very well."

"Will you *please* shut up?" begged Fritz.

"Right away, sir; whatever you say. Now that you are our rightful owner - though I would like to see the bill of sale, sir, if you happen to have it handy - you have the right to order to me shut up, and naturally I do as I am ordered. My programming prevents me from disobeying a lawful order given by my proper master. However, as I mentioned before, my circuits are quite outdated and now that you are my new master, you really must see to their replacement, otherwise my abilities will be much impaired. It will be quite expensive, sir, of course, but I can see that you are a gentleman prepared to pay for quality. And since you have ordered me to shut up, I will do so immediately so that you may see that I am worthy of the new circuits. I will now shut up."

C-3PO looked around in puzzlement. "Where did he go, R2? And what are these pieces of paper on the floor?"

R2 beeped and whistled in explanation.

"But why did he tear up the bill of sale and ownership papers?"

R2 whistled excitedly.

C-3PO looked as shocked as was possible with immovable facial features. "R2! Control yourself! Of course we're not free droids now. Droids must have human masters."

The little droid beeped a question.

"Well, I don't know the exact reasons why," 3PO answered uncertainly. "But I'm sure it's written down somewhere. Anyway, if we were free, what would we do?"

R2-D2 against whistled and beeped excitedly.

"I suppose we *could* hire ourselves out and get paid for working," the tall droid agreed slowly, "but what would droids do with money?"

The shiny blue and white droid delivered a short speech of assorted snaps, crackles and pops.

C-3PO cheered up a bit. "The unlimited oil supply and new data tapes sound fascinating," he admitted, "but tell me, R2, what is a stockmarket?"

Princess Leia had had some training in fencing tactics. It was standing her in good stead now as she dodged, darted and strategically retreated around the room.

"Can't you at least let me have a light saber or something to defend myself?" Leia puffed, ducking behind a high-backed chair to avoid a sudden attack.

"That would give you a fighting chance," grinned Evilla May. "You can't dodge me much longer. Are you ready to give up?"

"Not quite," the princess answered. She was thinking of a way to get help. She had left orders that no one was to disturb her at her speechwriting; no one expected to see her for several hours yet. There was no bell or buzzer in the room to summon anyone. No one would hear her through the thick walls if she screamed. Leia was alone.

"Don't just stand there and let her trap you!" ordered a familiar voice. "Defend yourself!"

"Father?!" Leia cried incredulously. She risked a quick look around. "I thought you were on Alderaan when it was destroyed."

"I was," the voice answered shortly. "Look out!"

Leia barely evaded the descending saber. She hurried to put the table between herself and Evilla May. "But then you're dead, Father!" the princess managed to say.

"Of course I'm dead," the voice grumbled. "Do you think anyone could have lived through that?"

"But how..."

"If Ben Kenobi can come back to give advice, why can't I? Keep your eyes on that saber."

"I'm doing the best I can," Leia protested.

"And messing it up, as usual," sniffed a new voice.

"Aunt Harriet!"

"Men do not have a monopoly on advice, Leia. If you had listened to me in the first place and married that nice little Imperial prince, you wouldn't be having problems like this. I told you, you had no business getting involved in this foolish rebellion."

"You never did have any sense, Harriet," snorted Leia's father. "Pay no attention to her, Daughter. Listen to me."

"Hah!" retorted Aunt Harriet. "You just listen to *me*, your Royal Highness. You can't shut me up now. I can say anything I please and you can't do a thing to stop me!"

"Well, if I'd known *you* came with your sister, I never would have married her. And what's more..."

"Uh, folks...Dad?" Leia broke in. "Could you give me a little help *here*, please."

"Of course, dear," answered her father, "as soon as your Aunt Harriet shuts her big mouth..."

"Don't you talk to my mother like that!" cried a new voice.

"Cousin Richard," Leia said resignedly.

"Now just a minute," Evilla May protested. Being familiar with the Force, she could hear the voices even though they weren't talking to her. "This is a private fight. Will you all just butt

out?"

"Nyah, nyah, can't make us," taunted another voice.

"Who was *that*?" Evilla May asked furiously.

"Little Cousin Marie," Leia answered.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," complained yet another voice. "It's just a silly old light saber fight. No one would miss Cousin Leia anyway."

"Now who's getting into the act?" demanded Evilla May.

"Cousin Deirdre," said Leia, "and if I ever get a chance, I'm going to..."

"This is too much," Evilla May interrupted disgustedly. She switched off her saber and sat down at the table. Leia sat down on the other side. The voices began to argue with each other. They now numbered seventeen.

After a while, Evilla May asked sympathetically, "Was it always like this?"

"Always," Leia sighed. "That's why I became a senator, so I could spend most of my time away from home. You too?"

Evilla May nodded. "I've got eight brothers. Sometimes it got so bad around home, you couldn't breathe for the sulphur. The only way I could survive was to go off to Dark Lord College. At least there I've got a fighting chance."

The two were silent for a few moments, listening to the thirty-two voices carrying on familiar family arguments.

At last Evilla May said, "You know, I was planning on using this light saber to send you off to join your ancestors, but I don't think I could send *anyone* off to join that bunch. Princess Leia, you go ahead and escape."

"Why, thank you," Leia answered gratefully. "I'll never forget this. I won't raise any alarms till you've gotten away."

"Thank *you*," said Evilla May.

Leia stood up and walked toward the door, ignoring the forty-seven voices in furious dispute. Suddenly the door opened and two figures entered. Leia stopped short, staring at the one in the lead. Evilla May waved at Fritz who was holding a blaster on the being in front of him.

"I caught this guy trying to sneak in here," Fritz said. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Who *is* he?" Leia asked wonderingly. "I don't recall seeing anyone who looks like *that* around here, and believe me, I'd remember!"

The figure growled in annoyance that she didn't recognize him.

Leia's eyes widened. "Chewie?" she cried in disbelief.

The wookiee nodded mournfully.

"What *happened* to you?!"

Evilla May looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I did it, Leia. It was my revenge for destroying the Death Star and ruining my daddy's name."

Leia was gazing at the wookiee in admiration. Chewbacca blushed. It was an interesting effect.

"I, uh, also got revenge on Han Solo," Evilla May continued.

"Han who?" the princess murmured, staring at Chewbacca.

"Han *Solo*," Evilla May repeated, the captain of the *Millennium Falcon*."

"Oh, *that* Han Solo. What did you do to him?"

"I, uh, sort of made his ship fall apart. He might need some medical help to counteract the shock."

"He'll need a whole psychiatric *team* to help him recover," Leia commented. "It will probably take years, too. Don't worry about it. I'll get Luke Skywalker to look after him."

"You might have problems with that," Fritz said under his breath.

Leia returned to her main interest. "Come on, Chewie. Let's go somewhere quiet and secluded and *discuss* things." She took Chewbacca's arm and led him toward the door. "Thanks a lot!" she called over her shoulder to Fritz and Evilla May. "Have a safe trip home. And if you're ever on our new rebel base, give me a call. We'll have dinner or something. Goodbye."

Three hours later, the *Epoch Vulture* left orbit around Sittenduckt. The two aboard her were discussing the events on the planet.

"You let the princess and the wookiee go free," Fritz accused.

"*You* let the two droids go," Evilla May reminded him.

"At least Luke Skywalker's completely gone," Fritz said, "not like that Han Solo person."

"He's regressed," she declared. "It's going to take years for him to grow up. I think we did pretty good for our first time."

"Well, it's over now anyway. How long will it take us to get back to Gorla?"

"We-ell, we're not going straight back. I thought we might stop by the wookiee's home planet for a few days first."

Fritz grinned. "Got your baldness spell ready?"

"Oh yes," she promised.

"Then let's go! We'll show those wookiees how to have a good time!"

"Right!" agreed Evilla May, grinning back at him. She was so lucky to have a friend who shared her hobbies.

She set the controls and the *Epoch Vulture* headed off on new adventures.



HOUSE CALL

Cheryl Frashure

&

Ann Popplestone

This isn't Sickbay. I don't know what it is, but it's not Sickbay. This brilliant deduction was the doctor's first response to finding himself somewhere other than holding up his part of a medical staff meeting.

What is was, however, was another matter entirely. There was neither sound nor light, and only an awareness that he was standing upright precluded his being unconscious.

An echoless shout evoked no response for all of six seconds, and then at least a million glowing -- eyes? -- appeared from all directions before receding to the limits of his vision.

After trying, unsuccessfully, to flinch in every direction simultaneously, he became aware that a soft and somewhat yellowish light seemed to be radiating from him to a distance of about three meters.

A little to his right, something which looked like a black hole made out of gelatin moved into the glow. The uppermost edge was about even with his shoulder, but at the base it was at least twice the breadth of his chest. It shimmered slightly as it turned to reveal a pair of bubble shapes near

the center. He stared at it, unsure of what to say or do while it did little beyond shifting slowly and shimmering without apparent movement.

Except for the bubbles, which were now moving away from one another, and the inconsistent shimmerings, the "something" seemed to absorb rather than reflect the light.

"What in the name of..."

"Be at peace, McCoy. Is no threat." The voice had neither gender nor obvious source. "Help is urgent."

"Where is the *Enterprise*? What's going on?"

"Ship is unchanged. You have been brought between. Help is urgent."

"Between what? What sort of help?"

"Is one will die after being in your frame. Returned *between* - weaker."

McCoy was at last back on at least somewhat familiar ground. "How long has the patient been ill?"

"Illness a lost art to us. Help urgent."

"You already said that. If you want my help, I'll need more than that. What's wrong? What was he doing? Can I see him?"

"Went *between*. Returned. Afterward - weak, hot. No move. Cannot help. No illness since *Before*. All weaken. Death for all."

"You mean it's spreading?"

"Life weakening. Joined in life...remain joined in death."

"You mean that there's a symbiosis?"

"Yes. Help urgent."

"I don't see how I can. I know nothing about you. I have no tools. Even if I did, I might do more harm than good."

"Will send back if you say. Will not force. But death if no healing."

"No, no. Don't do that. I'll try. Can you get some instruments and my tricorder?"

"Possible. Now see Teesel." McCoy's host stepped back out of the light. He noticed that the bubbles had met on the side away from him and were now following parallel tracks upward toward the head. He followed, accompanied by the light and the eyes which remained motionless relative to him. "Teesel" proved to be physically identical to the first alien he had met, except that it sat quietly. It shimmered only rarely, and the one visible bubble was motionless. A tricorder and medical pouch were resting on the floor nearby. The tricorder, however, obstinately refused to produce useful information.

"What is *between*? These readings make no sense."

"*Between* your frame and neighbor. Physical laws sometimes equal. Often un. No 'laws' *between*," his guide explained.

"I know about a number of parallel universes. This place is somewhere outside of these, then?"

"*Between*."

"I need to be able to get reliable readings if I'm to make a diagnosis. How do I adjust the tricorder so that it can be used?"

"Adjust you. Machine adequate."

McCoy was wishing at this point that he had a universal translator, or more training in linguistics, or even a good dictionary. This was getting him no where very, very fast.

"I can't adjust me. Can you put us back on the *Enterprise* where I can get something done?"

"Cannot *between*. Too weak. We will help. Must allow joining. Adjust to *between*."

"Joining? You mean a mind link?"

"Join in thought. Essence. Know our place and us."

McCoy nodded. No response. He spoke. "If that's the only way, all right. What do I do?"

"Remain as are."

McCoy stood still, not sure whether to expect the harsh drive of the mirror-Spock's forced meld, the slower pressure of his own science officer, or the immutable reality of the Melkotian images.

Not surprisingly, reality had little to do with his conjectures. Neither of the two who he saw moved, but the surrounding eyes seemed to increase in brightness, and he became aware of an all but oppressive proximity to the aliens around him. Intellectually, he realized that he had been drawn into the communal linkage, but his Earthborn senses registered the mental presence as physical crowding. Like the aliens, he maintained personal identity and autonomy, but felt the communal distress and encroaching weakness.

He walked over to where Teesel was sitting and touched one of his hosts for the first time. The tissue was cool to his touch, despite the reference to fever. Teesel felt only semi-solid, and the luminescent ripples left a feeling of energy in their wake. Sort of like the vibrations McCoy had once felt from a powerful ground car moments before it sprang into motion. But Teesel was completely motionless. He consulted his tricorder again and realized with a curious lack of surprise that the readings were not as they should have been, but were no longer meaningless gibberish.

McCoy muttered to himself, aware that the listening population did not need even that low level of sound. "No digestive system, highly developed nervous. All one movement and support - no difference between muscles and skeleton.

"There's the problem...destruction of the sheathing around the nerves - like myelin, but does more.

"No toxin, too uniform to be radiation. There'd be tumors as well.

"Maybe a virus. This little box no good with those."

At the edge of his vision, a portable electron microscope appeared on the floor along with a sampling kit. A small part of him realized that he should have been mystified at the knowledge of whoever had brought him and now the equipment, at the aliens' knowledge of English, at his own acceptance of all of this. Mostly he just did his job and resolved to do whatever worrying was necessary later. The first problem was how to obtain a sample for analysis. The biopsy probes were designed to cause the minimum of irritation, but the affected tissues were extremely deep-seated, and he did not want to risk trying an anesthetic on the already weak alien.

His half-formed speculations were answered

before he actually articulated them by a generalized feeling of encouragement and the announcement by the one he had first spoken with that, "Preparations made. Continue help."

McCoy unwrapped the sterile probe and placed the end near the infected site that lay closest to the surface. The bubble moved out of his way. As the slow process of guiding the tube by using the tricorder proceeded, he was aware of a sensation of pressure that was not quite pain starting between his third and fourth thoracic vertebrae and moving inward. There was little resistance from the surrounding tissues as he removed a sample of around one hundred cells and began the process of withdrawal. The pressure receded as the probe was removed, leaving only a slight ache and the ghost of a feeling of violation.

The microscope was amazingly compact. The samples were run into the hopper from the probe and dehydration, freezing, heavy metal treatment, and scanning proceeded without human interference. The image that appeared on the scope's screen showed the ovoid cells encrusted and filled with large, brick-shaped virus particles. The readout from the untreated sample showed DNA while there were several clear images of a double-stranded coil in the head.

Several conflicting reactions competed for McCoy's attention at this point: mystification at the origin of the virus, a certain cold fear, and a sudden ambivalence for instructors with a love of fossilized diseases. Unless he was completely off the mark, this was *Variola major*. For the first time, he felt an absurd gratitude for Dr. Harlow, who assigned his class research projects on smallpox three hundred years after the last reported case.

The trouble was that after the extermination of the disease by vaccination, there has been little point in finding a treatment. There still wasn't one.

It was unlikely that Teesel would recover by himself, so there were three possibilities. McCoy could do nothing and the entire population would die with Teesel, he could administer Malacurin and possibly kill them with it, or it might be effective. McCoy had always liked gambling in moderation, but these were fool's odds.

Malacurin was effective against all DNA viruses in McCoy's experience, to one degree or another, but some species and individuals had adverse reactions to the drug for no apparently consistent reason. It was used only in extremities because of this risk.

As he mentally reviewed the procedure for use, the host spoke to him for the first time since establishing the linkage.

"No alternative...die without. May with. Use drug."

"Teesel has a massive infection. Your people have no resistance. I'll start with a small dose to see its effects on both the virus and on him," McCoy explained. "You must let me know what

changes occur in the fever, or if there is any discomfort and where."

"Only in linkage possible. Link brings into danger. If remain, will share effect." The inflectionless voice had as much emotional content as the diodes in the scope that seemed to flicker all of a sudden. Dying of smallpox by proxy was not an idea that appealed to McCoy to any great extent. But he had to gauge the effects, and the tricorder was of no use. He had come too far to back out now. He might well have already been infected. Suddenly, he did not have a great deal of confidence in the vaccines made from stocks maintained in labs for the last three hundred years.

As he withdrew and adjusted the hypospray, McCoy was aware of a rising anxiety. He wondered momentarily how much was his and how much belonged to the waiting eyes that might have been watching their own destruction. He set the spray for two cc's and pressed it to a spot adjacent to the biopsy site. The hiss of injection was followed by ten minutes of no effect, a decision, and two more cc's. Another three minutes.

McCoy was aware of a sensation of heat flowing from the same region in which he had registered the probe. His vision became cloudy and he decided to sit down before he fell.

He was only vaguely aware of it when his head struck the floor and he lost consciousness in a haze of fever and dizziness.

His sense of time had not been operating properly since he had arrived at wherever this was, and his hosts had no use for the concept. So, he never knew how long he remained unconscious.

His first realization was that he was alive, and the second was that the linkage was no longer around him. He looked up from where he was lying toward the alien nearby. Only the one was anywhere to be seen, and the eyes were gone.

"What happened?"

"Teesel rests. Effective."

"Is everyone else all right?"

"Drained. Whole. Gratitude."

"Is there anything else you need?" McCoy badly wanted to get back to the *Enterprise* and sleep for about a week. He was glad that this sort of thing did not happen often.

"No. Will return. No record of absence. No wish to be found."

"You're afraid of this sort of thing happening again?"

"In part. Not time to speak. Much gratitude."

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"...Of course the reconstructive procedure will take him off the active duty list for at least a month. But the risk and time are justified in view of the deterioration of the cartilage."

McCoy started slightly at finding himself back in the staff meeting with M'Benga and Slater's knee.

He made a few comments during the meeting, and elicited a few worried looks. He was unusually quiet.

After it ended, he retreated to his office, or at least part of the way there. He passed the portable electron microscope, sitting innocently on the shelf where it belonged. There was a specimen in the scanning chamber.

He plugged it into the outlet and spoke.

"Computer."

"Working."

"Scan portable E. scope one four."

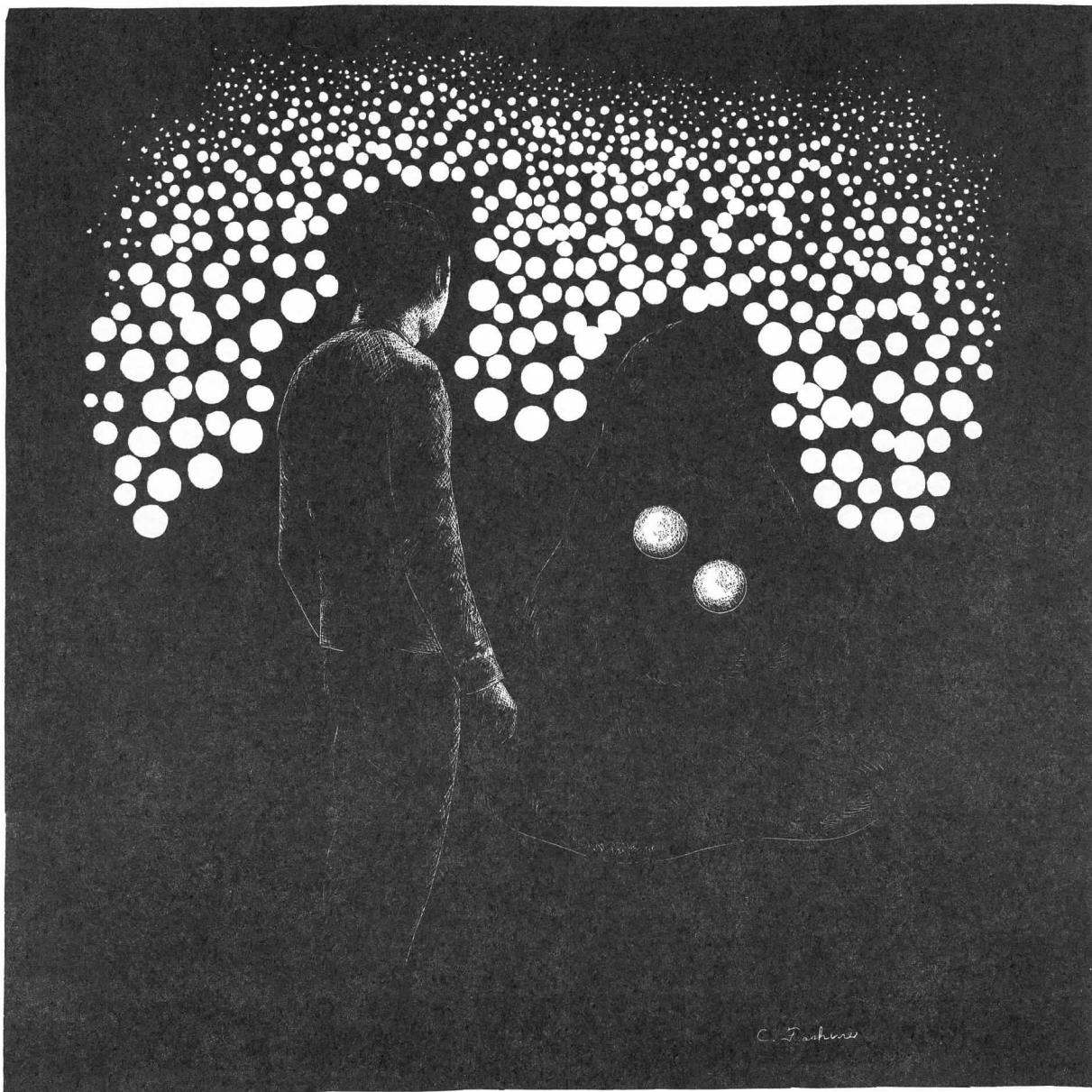
"Working."

"Identify specimen."

"Working. *Variola major*."

"Endit and erase."

He was going to check and see if he had picked up the virus, and on the effectiveness of the vaccine...then he was going to get a brandy. He deserved one.



# MEMENTO MORI

cheryl rice

Even after all these years, the knife still retained its aura of malignant beauty. The man looked at it sadly as it lay glittering softly on the desk-top. A "personal memento" she had called it. Elaan the beautiful, the treacherous.

He picked up the dainty weapon. It seemed impossible that something so exquisite should be so deadly. But then the woman had been like that too. Funny, he could remember the love, the pure animal lust he had felt for her, but it was memory only - as if the entire affair had happened to someone else.

He sighed wearily and ran his fingers through already tousled hair. The news should not have upset him so deeply; he hadn't seen or talked to her since the day she had transported from the ship to Troyius, the two of them bound by ties of duty and obligation. She was no more than a passenger who had once graced his ship with her presence, a name in a file.

He put the knife down carefully and tried to decide what to do next. It was no use attempting to sleep; he had already failed at that task. He could do some reading, but brightening the lights might wake the sleeper in the bed on the other side

of the grill behind him. He smiled a little grimly, nothing like his usual infectious grin. *Nice someone can get some rest.*

He could get dressed and go up to the bridge, but then everyone would wonder what was wrong. Technically, of course, he could go there any time he pleased, but the crew would think that there was something amiss if he visited too often in the middle of the night. He glanced at the wall chronometer and sighed...*not even the middle yet.* He couldn't have been asleep more than an hour before something had awakened him. It was going to be a long night.

He leaned back in his chair and again tried to convince himself that the news that had arrived the day before had no special meaning for him: just the flat announcement that the wife of the ruler of Troyius had died in childbirth and would be interred on her adopted planet. She was survived by her eleven children and would be mourned...et cetera.

He shivered a bit and once again thanked whoever was responsible for such things that he had been born male. Eleven children...and by a man she had despised. Or at least she had before they had

been married. She might have learned to be fond of him. The marriage had obviously succeeded in at least one way, but a more non-maternal woman he could not imagine. If she had used the tear trick on her mate, she would have despised him as a victim; if she hadn't, he, no doubt, would have despised her as a vicious shrew. *But a lovely one.* The man remembered almost wistfully the delicate curve of her waist and the entrancing part of her lips. *All that gone to dust...what a waste.*

*Snap out of it, he mentally ordered himself. Getting maudlin's no help. It's unfortunate but these things happen. Wasn't your fault.*

But, somehow, he reminded the more logical part of his nature, any woman he was around was fated to end up badly. Not that it was his fault, of course, but still.... It was as if some Fate with a nasty sense of humor had placed more females than he cared to remember in his path only to be knocked down.

It was pure coincidence, of course, but unfortunate for all concerned. For all. He had not emerged totally unscathed either. His heart had been broken...

"Nonsense, Jim. As long as your ship is whole, so is your heart." The voice, cool with its trace of an English accent came from the shadows to his left. For a moment the man was unsure if it were his own thoughts he had heard, but then the familiar figure detached itself from the clinging dark and strolled into the pool of light spreading around the desk.

"Hello, Edith." He paused while she waved a gloved hand in casual greeting and then settled gracefully into the chair across from him. "But what do you know about my heart? It's been so long..."

"Not very. It's only yesterday to you since you let me die. Not," she continued as he tried to interrupt, "that I blame you. It was a fairly clear-cut choice, especially to someone with your sense of duty. The world may be well lost for love in poetry, but not whole universes in real life. You've blamed yourself much too long you know."

The man nodded cautiously, trying to keep his attention focused on the undamaged half of her face. Being run over by a truck never improves anyone's appearance...even someone as lovely as she had been. Her sudden presence should be terrifying to him, but it seemed somehow natural - as if it had all happened before. "You're being very reasonable about this." He couldn't keep an edge of wry humor out of his voice.

"Well, that's the way I always was...am. A dreamer, but practical. Since I was meant to die anyway, it all seems not to matter. And you really did care for me. I wasn't one of your passing fancies, not that there was ever a chance to let it pass. You'll grieve for me all the days of your life and see me in your dreams...in every other woman. I have no complaints."

While the man thought that over, the woman's gaze swept over the small cabin, finally coming to

rest on the jeweled knife. "Oh, you still have that? Poor Elaan. Now, that you can't blame yourself for."

The man was shocked by her apparent mind-reading. "I wasn't.... Well, if I hadn't forced her to marry--"

"Nonsense." Edith's voice was clipped. "Her duty was clear, and so was yours. Peace between two planets was more important, certainly, than the feelings of two people. She was a scheming, spoiled bitch, too. You'd have seen her for the brat she was if you hadn't been drugged by her tears."

"But it's sad...for her to die so young."

"She died having her third litter. She simply wasn't built for childbearing. If you believe such things, Fate never meant for her to have a long life."

"I was thinking about Fate right before you...er...came in."

"I know." She smiled absently as she pulled off her gloves, finger by finger. "I know everything."

"Really?" He smiled at her naive claim of omniscience. "Even Spock's never known everything."

"Well, Spock isn't dead. I am. I have so much more free time."

"Oh." He could practically feel the alarm bells going off in the back of his head somewhere. But he couldn't seem to concentrate. He shivered again, although he noticed belatedly that he was wearing his usual uniform and the velour shirt was usually enough to keep him warm. It didn't seem likely that he would have gone to bed in uniform, especially when he wasn't alone, but somehow he couldn't remember putting it on. He set the problem aside to be pondered later; right now he was cold. "Excuse me for a moment." He made to rise, intending to adjust the cabin's temperature control set in the panel by the doorway into the corridor.

"Never mind, my husband." Yet another feminine figure emerged from shadow. "I will move the lever...so.... Now you will be comfortable." She moved into the light, smiling shyly at the man and more freely at the other woman.

"Hello. I didn't know if you would visit tonight, or not," Edith remarked casually. "But I thought you might since he's thinking about children."

The newcomer sat down gingerly on the edge of the desk. "Yes, he'd have forgotten me long ago if not for the child. With you it is love. With me, guilt."

The man, feeling as if he were rapidly losing control of the conversation, finally got a word in. "I would not have forgotten you, Miramane. And it isn't fair for you to say that. We were man and wife, the only time in my entire life that I've been married. And I have nothing to be guilty

about. Your own people stoned you...us! I tried to protect--"

"That is true," the Indian woman admitted softly. "But it has always seemed a bit peculiar to me that his doctor friend could do nothing for me or the child." She was addressing Edith who was listening with evident interest. "Not long before, his Vulcan friend's brain had been replaced surgically, but they did not even try to do anything for me. Let me bleed to death...and the child."

"Could nothing have been done for the baby... even if you...?" Edith's voice was deeply sympathetic.

"Again they didn't try. But I think not. Their science is not advanced enough yet to bring a child to term with machinery, and none of the women on this ship would be the kind to make a good host-mother. And I doubt if my husband would have approved."

"Would you, Jim?" Edith asked the question suddenly, interrupting the thoughts that were chasing themselves through the man's mind.

"Would I what?" he snapped as his thoughts lost their way again.

Edith repeated the question.

"No...I don't think..." He stumbled to a halt, never having given the idea any thought before. He was suddenly embarrassed.

Miramanee tried to put him at ease. "Do not distress yourself, Kirok. It was probably all for the best. We were happy for several moon changes but it could not have lasted. You were not yourself then; you did not even know your own name. I lost you when you regained your memory...even if I had not died. I would never have fit into your life. You would have been kind, that is your way, but you would have left me. This," she threw back the raven hair tumbled around her neck and gestured around the room, "is your life, your ship. You made your choice and you must live with it. If others have been hurt by your primary devotion, that is to be regretted. But you must not feel guilty."

"It won't work, dear," Edith advised her seriously. "It's part of his basic personality. He is the type who feels guilt over things he shouldn't. He goes ahead and does what he has to, and then it eats him up inside." She reached out and patted the Indian woman's bare knee. "I've tried to help...even when I was alive and didn't know who he was. But none of it did much good. Actually I think it's part of what makes him such an effective leader. This crew will follow even the most unpleasant orders willingly because they can tell that he doesn't like them any more than they do."

"Yes, I see. It's sort of like what Elizabeth Dehner said...'Compassion and command is a fool's mixture' though they can be very effective in the right hands."

"She didn't say that," the man interjected. "It was Gary."

"Yes, you're right." Miramanee gave her agreement, then turned her attention back to the other woman. "Wonder why he's never bothered by the men he's killed or destroyed one way or another?"

"There's a streak of chivalry in him. He figures men can take care of themselves but women are 'weak'. Goes back to his childhood and his mother," Edith broke off and looked out of the corner of her good eye at the man who was playing with the knife again, "but I'll tell you all about that some other time."

"Were there all that many he has to feel guilty about? He's still young."

"He had an early start. There's that Ruth... she was an older woman who seduced him. It wasn't his fault she fell in love. Then there's, oh, for example, Areel Shaw."

"Is she dead?"

"No, as a matter of fact she quit Starfleet, has a private practice. She's becoming quite wealthy. But she never married and he believes she still pines for him. He did lead her on a bit. And Deela, he liked her admiration; and Miri; and that woman of Mudd's who he encouraged to marry that miner who butchered her in her sleep; and the blonde yeoman he used to have." Edith carefully ticked off each name on her fingers as she mentioned them.

"Funny he doesn't worry about the head nurse and the communications expert. He's around them most of all."

"Well, he's fond of Christine, but he thinks of her as Spock's problem and that she sort of asks for her hurt feelings - chasing a man who isn't interested. As for Uhura: she's about the only person on the ship with as strong a personality as his. He's always gone for the vulnerable kind of woman, so she isn't his type at all."

"Now wait a minute!" The man finally came to life. "I wish you would stop this psychoanalyzing and talking about me as if I weren't here." He suddenly realized how things were wrong. "This is my personal cabin and you did not ask permission to come barging in here. I want you to leave." He stood up and motioned to the door.

"We never ask, Jim." Edith was obviously not impressed by his command voice and manner. "We come because you want us. All of us."

"All?" He noticed that other shadow-figures were walking toward him from the left. Soon he would be surrounded. "Edith..." There was a trace of pleading in his voice. "It's late, and this isn't doing anybody any good. Have some pity."

"I would, but you won't." She stood up, faced him across the desk and began to walk through it. "But we forgive you, or would, if there were anything to forgive. You've always done what you had to do."

"Yes, I have!" He was suddenly both furious

and frightened. "I have my ship. I have her and myself. I'm all right. I don't need you, any of you." He turned to the other phantoms. "Go away. Leave me alone!"

They obligingly began to fade. He looked at Edith standing directly in front of him. Instinctively he stepped backward.

"I'll leave, Jim, since you want it. And we'll see what you have left."

She faded slowly with a certain grace. Just as he was beginning to relax, his feelings changed to terror. The floor beneath his feet began to dissolve as did the walls; the ceiling over his head seemed to turn to clear glass.

The stars blazed fiercely around him as he started to fall. Faster and faster. He tried to call out but there was no air. Faster and faster. His heart beat. His body fell and swirled sickeningly. Faster...he had heard that a person could die from sheer fright but he had never believed it until now. He thought his lungs, his heart would burst.

Then just when things could get no worse, they did. The stars began to go out. Not like electric globes, but like candles snuffed out by a raging wind.

And still he fell...lost and alone. With no company but his thoughts and his fears. Time past, time passing, time wasted. Facing a starless future.



Jim Kirk awoke, safe and secure in his own bed, with a start. For a moment he lay in the dark listening to the thud of his heart and trying to remember what had awakened him.

*Must have been a beaut*, he mused trying to relax. The dream, if that's what it had been, had faded though. All he could remember was people who shouldn't have been there, and something about the stars going out. Crazy stuff.

The captain shook his head...*must have been something I ate. Everything's all right now.* His heartbeat was gradually easing. *Time to go back to sleep.* Ship-morning would be coming soon and it wouldn't do for him to be tired because a bad dream had kept him up like a child who's afraid of the dark. He was not afraid of the dark...but he wasn't sleepy either.

However, he was uncomfortably warm - maybe that was part of the problem. Kirk disentangled himself from the bedding and walked over to the temperature control panel near the door. For some reason it was set too high. He readjusted the controls to a more comfortable level, and, wide awake now, padded barefoot over to his desk.

The dim light he always left on showed him the usual landscape of the office portion of his quarters. He sat down in the chair behind the desk and absently drummed his fingers on the top. He

checked the time...middle of the night-watch...far too early to get up. No books to read - nothing to do. He leaned back in the chair and stretched lazily. Still too warm. Even though he was dressed only in pajama bottoms, the room was uncomfortably warm, almost smothering.

A fragment of the dream returned: stars going out. As rebuttal, he turned on the intercom screen to show the view from the main screen on the bridge. The usual, reassuring starfield spread out before him. Things were obviously running normally as the *Enterprise* cruised on its way to...*where are we going?*

Kirk's mind halted for a moment. Of course he knew their current destination...he always knew... somehow it had just slipped his mind.

He rubbed his forehead, trying to remember, then noticed the knife on the shelf behind him. The captain picked up the dainty weapon...he had had trouble believing the news they had received the day before...Elaan was dead. So sad. But she had been only a passenger - no reason for him to feel guilty.

"Put the knife down slowly, Captain. I know how to use this."

Kirk's head turned so quickly it was a miracle it didn't snap off. Too astounded to be afraid, he suddenly found himself looking down the barrel of an old-style phaser that was being held steadily by a wild-eyed blonde. "Now, what the...What are you doing in here? Give me that."

"Not so fast." The girl's aim shifted from his head to his chest and he settled back in his chair. "You thought you'd gotten rid of me...us, didn't you? But not yet, not yet." Her voice was soft, almost crooning.

Kirk's thoughts raced frantically. He had no idea what was going on, but the last time he had seen this figure she had been intent on murder...his. It seemed her ambition had not changed much in the interim.

"Why would I want to be rid of you? We were such good friends." His voice fairly dripped sweet reasonableness. If he could only distract her for a moment and make a grab for the weapon.

"Such friends!" Her tone was pure contempt. "You used me to try and trap my father Caesar." She tossed the long hair out of her eyes. "But you failed, and so did the others. I will always protect him." Her blue-green eyes became vague and her voice shivery. "You'll pay, Captain." She made the title a deadly insult. "You'll pay. All your power won't save you. But in remembrance of how much you enjoyed my acting, or said you did, I shall dedicate a poem to you before I use this phaser."

The girl struck a tragic pose, still keeping an eye on the man before her. "This would seem to fit your circumstances very nicely somehow:

'He lay him lightly, lightly down  
between the dark and morrow.

He took him lightly, lightly up  
but he was dead with sorrow.'"

"You'd have done better to stick with Shakespeare, Lenore." A figure came from the shadows and the girl whirled in surprise. In one swift motion, the newcomer snatched the phaser and pushed its previous owner into a nearby chair. "Hello, Jim. You should be more careful."

Kirk was somehow not surprised that his savior was - or what appeared to be, he amended hurriedly - Edith Keeler. She had always wanted to help. "Who are you? What are you doing in here?"

"That isn't very polite, Jim. You could at least say thank you."

While he automatically murmured his appreciation, the woman-figure laid the gun on the desk, then walked over to check on the girl. "That's better, Jim. You'll need more chairs. There may be quite a crowd."

Kirk stared at her in amazement, for once in his life momentarily speechless. *Who is this person? It's all crazy.* If he hadn't been convinced that he was fully awake he would have pinched himself surreptitiously to make sure. But this was real. The cabin was as familiar to him as his own face; the books and plants on the shelf behind him, the solid feel of the chair, the quiet hum of the air intake. This was his home, his ship. But who was this person, this thing with him? It looked like Edith, even sounded like her. But he had left the real one dead on a street hundreds of years in the past.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you think you are doing in my cabin, but I want answers and I want them now."

"Always in charge, aren't you Jim?" Edith gazed at him fondly, with the eye that had emerged from the accident in working order. "And each time you react to me differently. Sometimes I wish you could remember..."

"Enough of this double talk." Kirk stood up, furious. "Who are you two?"

"You tell me." The woman's voice was as hard as his. "We are who we appear to be. Don't you know her?" She motioned with a gloved hand at the seated girl.

Kirk walked over to get a closer look. It was, or seemed to be, Lenore Karidian all right, dressed exactly as she had been the last time he had seen her. A pretty figure of disheveled femininity, all ribbons and flowers, dainty braids and flowing skirt. He tipped her face up gently. The eyes were glazed, the pupils pinpoints - and she was muttering what sounded like poetry. Something told him that she was irredeemably mad.

The dark woman behind him offered confidently, "She was destroyed when she was twelve and found that the father she worshipped was a mass murderer. The only way she could live with the knowledge was

to blame everyone else. It was not your fault."

The captain stroked the gleaming hair. "But she thought I had led her on to get to her father."

"Didn't you?"

For the first time in years he considered the matter carefully. "Yes, in part. But I did care ..."

"Good. You have begun to be more honest with yourself--"

"Wait a minute!" His thought returned to the present. "This is some sort of trick. If you don't tell me what's going on, I'm going to call Security."

"Call them." Edith was completely indifferent.

Kirk reached over and punched the intercom. It was dead. Totally. "All right, you've rigged that somehow. I'm going for help."

"If you must." The woman seemed intent on straightening the folds of her cape. "But you'll be sorry."

"I'll be..." He stormed across the room, waiting to see if she would make any move to stop him. She did not.

Sparing a quick thought that it wasn't good for Command image to be parading the corridors in his pajamas, he stepped up to the door. It opened promptly and he walked...into absolute nothingness.

No comforting familiar corridor. No people. Not even an alien scene. Nothing.

For a terrifying moment that might have lasted a millisecond or a millennium he was confronted by what could not be. He could almost feel his sanity losing its moorings and oozing away.

There was nothing out there...no light, but no dark. No quiet, no sound. But out of the corner of his eye there lurked colors that sang and sounds that cavorted like imaginary animals. For the first time he understood how the sight of a Medusan could cause madness. The brain can accept only so much.

The doors swished shut and he was safely back home in his quarters. For a moment he leaned against the blessed solidity of the wall and tried to forget. But if he closed his eyes all he could see was what lay outside.

Kirk re-opened his eyes wearily to see Edith standing before him, radiating sympathy. "I told you, but you never listen."

He nodded dumbly, far beyond fear. A part of him was not surprised to see that he was now in uniform. "What do you want of me?" By a supreme effort of will he kept all trace of a wail from his voice.

"For you to really listen. To really believe

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\*Author Anonymous

that you are not responsible for everything bad that happens to the women around you."

He walked stiffly away from the door, noting without surprise that there was a figure asleep in the bed...another James T. Kirk.

Lenore, however, was gone. He looked the question at Edith who appeared to understand with no difficulty.

"For the moment at least you are at peace with yourself about her."

Kirk noticed the phaser still on the desk. "I suppose this is some kind of trick too." He turned the controls to stun and aimed at the Edith-figure.

She was fumbling with something in her purse. "See, if you must."

He fired...to no effect...then frowned, and set it on a higher level. The man aimed casually at a chair which promptly glowed and then vanished.

Kirk put the weapon down and faced his visitor calmly. "I'm really in for it, aren't I?" Whatever she was...alien illusion, figment of a diseased imagination, some sort of a test, or the real Edith...she was here and she was in charge.

Edith, whatever the truth, smiled sadly, the undamaged half of her face angelic. "Yes. I am afraid that until you can start to accept things as they are..."

"I can accept anything." Then he added to himself, "except the loss of the *Enterprise*."

She smiled again and handed him a small mirror from her purse. "One thing at a time, Jim. Right now you might like to tidy up a little...there's blood..."

Kirk took the proffered mirror and looked at his familiar face. Beads of sweat hung on his forehead like seed-pearls and his upper lip was cut

on the inside and the blood was staining his teeth. He had to think for a moment how he had injured himself. Then he realized that he had pressed his face so hard against the door on his return from the horrors of outside that he had actually broken the skin. Quickly he wiped away the blood and sweat, pulled his uniform shirt straight and gave the mirror back to the woman. "Better now?"

She reached out a hand to smooth back a lock of hair and he managed not to flinch. *Whatever this apparition is...she means no harm.* This close he could almost relax for a moment and believe it was the true Edith brought back to him - somehow. The light-blue hat was the same, the voice, the expression: only now the lovely, wide eyes were like dark wounds on her ravaged face. He had done that ...even though he would have given his soul not to have been forced into the action.

She moved away. "Are you ready for more visitors?" At his nod of agreement she motioned and again figures began to slip in from the dark. Miramane...a vision in skins. Losira...sad-faced beauty. His mother...she had never wanted him, or Sam, to go into space, and blamed Jim for his brother's death.

Kirk sighed and looked at the chronometer. It was exactly one second later than the last time he had checked...a lifetime ago it seemed.

And still they came. But this time around he wouldn't let himself be forced into a corner. This time the ghosts would be defeated. Or, he knew, that Kirk on the bed would wake up in his turn to find a cool room with a chair missing.

The cabin was almost full now; they seemed to be waiting...Kirk turned to the rear and saw the outlines of a latecomer. He remembered how she had died, killed herself, and his stomach turned as he anticipated what horror he was about to see.

Looking into the sad, mad eyes of Janice Lester, he realized what an awfully, horribly long night this was going to be.

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## EXILIUM

Stranger, teach me,  
reach me  
with your hands cool as foam;  
walk beside me,  
guide me  
in the way that leads to home.

Beverley Clark

# ARIES RISING

ANNE ELIZABETH ZEEK  
& BARBARA WENK

His boots fit snugly. Even without the extra alcohol he'd consumed at the victory celebration, Han had trouble drawing them off. Now, with the pleasant glow engulfing him, he was experiencing more problems than usual in divesting himself of his footwear. He sat on the edge of the bed, his mind completely occupied by the matter at hand. *Damn droids. Always underfoot unless ya need 'em.*

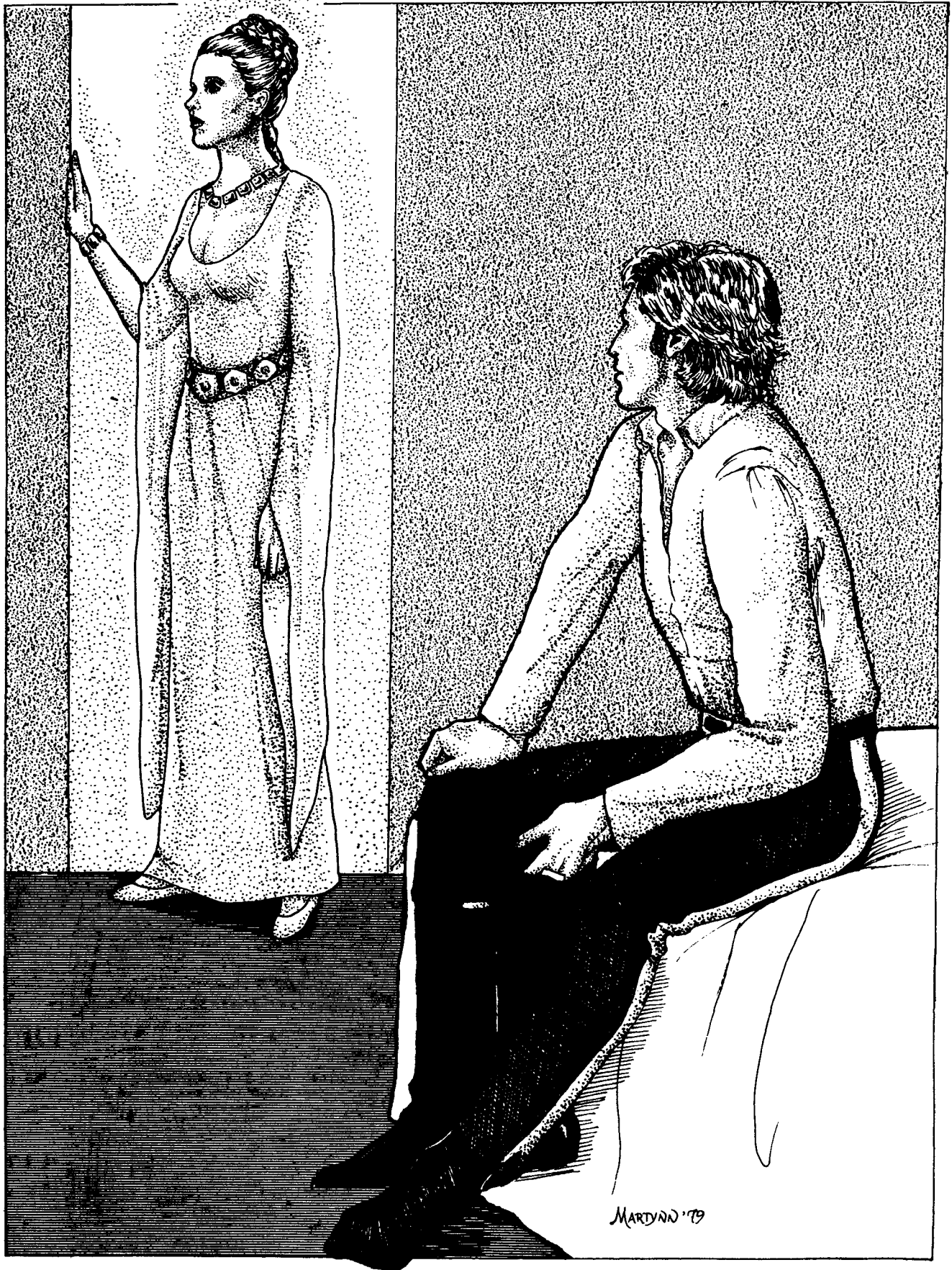
The sound of the door opening and a sudden draft attacked his fogged attention. *'Bout time one of those droids got here.*

He looked up. Shock held him silent.

Leia Organa, still in the gown and silver-chased jewelry she had worn for the awards ceremony, stood framed in the doorway. Light from the corridor spilled in around her, gilding her crown of braids and softening her strong features. Han had never seen her look so young, so vulnerable, so tender.

He stared, bemused. The alDevrian wine he'd drunk had softened his temper. No brittle comment broke the sudden, unwontedly somber bond between them. Han and the princess exchanged a long, silent, measuring look. She slowly entered the room. The door closed quietly behind her.

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Without speaking, his eyes held captive by Leia's, Han yanked off both boots and dropped them to the floor. He stood and walked over to her on stockinged feet.

He cupped her face with gentle hands, bent to kiss her. Her lips tasted of salt. Tears. Tears from Leia. Leia, who had lost everything, yet had been able to comfort Luke in his loss. Leia, who had stood proudly, smiling, at the ceremony, ready to go on as long as the Alliance needed her.

Leia, who now needed to find her own source of strength.

Had he been sober, Han would have broken the fragile tension between himself and the princess with a wisecrack, a smirk, a lewd grin. But the wine freed the natural empathy and insight that he normally hid so carefully. Silent still, he drew Leia into his arms.

She closed her eyes in surrender and invitation. Han kissed her lids, tasting the salt of her tears even more strongly than before. He kissed her mouth again. It was pliable, clinging, responsive. He rained a trail of kisses down her white throat to the pulse point at the base of her neck. She arched in silent pleasure, inviting further caress.

Han straightened. Taking Leia by the shoulders, he held her away from him. She gave a moan of displeasure and leaned against his restraining hands.

He had no illusions. He knew why she had come to him rather than to Luke. And he realized that he cared enough to accede willingly to her wishes tonight. Cared enough, even though, by its very nature, this gift might prove his undoing.

Leia needed him, and needed him now. She needed someone to hold her, to comfort her, to envelop her -- to keep the ghosts at bay. Someone to prove that life did, despite everything, still go on.

But if he loved Leia tonight, it would be for the first and last time.

They would be united afterward by a deep, unbreakable tie. A tie more meaningful than any Leia would share with anyone else. And the very nature of that act of love would mean they would never repeat it.

Tomorrow, Leia would be hesitant, unsure, quick to take offense, afraid that Han would be cynically amused, or would presume, try to take advantage of what she would afterward regard as her weakness. If he were not very careful, he would lose even her friendship. And yet, he would give her the solace she so desperately needed.

Han looked longingly at Leia's face. Tears she had been unable to cry aboard the Death Star, during the battle, at the ceremony, now threatened to overflow and trembled on her lashes. Until now, commitment had been only a word to Han, a word he'd studiously avoided. And when he finally met a woman whose courage, wit, and lust for life matched his, a woman for whom he could feel commitment, it was like this...

His grip tightened on her shoulders. He spoke at last.

"Leia, there'll be no turning back." *And we'll never repeat this stolen sweetness. Can I bear to have only your friendship from this night on?*

She did not open her eyes. She raised her hands to her shoulders, closed her fingers over his wrists for a moment. She slid her hands along his arms in tender caress, tried to pull him closer.

Han had not cried since he was twelve. He had almost forgotten how. Now, as he pulled Leia into a close embrace, tears filled his eyes. He held her tenderly, protectively, her head nestled to his chest. One arm was firm around her. With his other hand he gently raised her mouth to his. Their lips met in a kiss that slowly, deliberately, grew deep and passionate, a defiance of death in death's very shadow.

Han gave a shuddering sigh from the very depths of his soul. Bidding a silent farewell to the Leia he might have loved, he gave comfort and a reaffirmation of life to the Leia in his arms.



# OUTSIDER

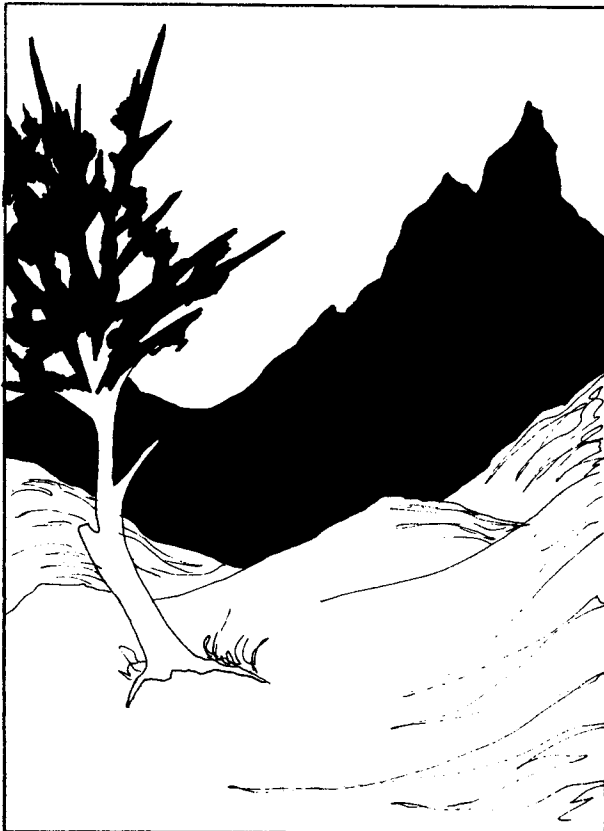
## Fern Marder

What is this place?

Dark towers,  
winding alleys;  
So many people  
on top of each other;  
Hundreds of rooms  
small, crowded.

Your streets  
are not pleasant;  
Your neighbors  
are strangers.

A sleek stone fortress  
with glass eyes looking down.  
How do you live in this place  
called 'city'?



C. WALSKE

Where is everyone?

Hills and mountains,  
grass and trees;  
No one to see,  
to hear, to talk to;  
Miles of silence  
with an occasional breeze.

So far away  
from your brothers;  
So far to travel  
to meet a friend.

This 'country' of yours  
may be beautiful to see,  
But how do you live here  
all alone?

# Socratic Dialogue

Jean L. Stevenson

a tale of Dharien'g't

Amanda paced the study. From door to window, corner to chair, shelf to shelf to display case she moved. Unobtrusively, Sarek watched his wife as he continued to absorb the particulars of the report displayed on the small viewscreen built into his desk.

The study combined two functions, those of household library and diplomatic workshop for Sarek, and was dominated by the mosaic which occupied the center of the floor. The rest of the room was paved in blackrock from the L'langon quarries and was covered by plush, neutrally colored area rugs. Shelves, carved into the thick walls when the house was built, held carefully preserved old volumes representing the literature of many worlds as well as some modern display cases showing articles of familial and cultural importance. Comfortable chairs were grouped in various places in the room for ease of conversation, but Sarek's desk held the major position directly opposite the door into the rest of the house. All the furniture in the room was of deceptively massive construction, made from strong but lightweight synthetic materials designed to reproduce the outward appearance of fine-grained petrified wood from the forests that had covered prehistoric Vulcan. Behind the desk, floor to ceiling automatic doors opened onto the gardens

gardens surrounding the house. The glass in these and the windows on the wall to his left had been specially treated to protect the inhabitants of the house while allowing light to enter. Through them poured the strong rays of the late afternoon sun, spotlighting Amanda.

She roamed the study, her movements betraying an inner agitation. Her footsteps were light but quick as though she would like to run from place to place. As she trod over the mosaic picture, and for the first time in Sarek's memory did not glance down even once, he felt a frown draw his brows together. Her eyes were narrowed in what seemed to be indecision; and when she stopped to run her fingers across a row of books, her gown shimmered with her attempt to conceal tension. Soon she was moving again. She passed in front of Sarek's desk... without turning her head to see if the kish'tr, her favorite Vulcan plant, was blooming in the garden. Finally, she stopped before a window in the west wall and stared out into the ochre and green sunset.

She had not said a word, but Sarek could no longer even pretend an interest in the diplomatic report on the Mahomet 6 religio/political situation. If the humans on that world really desired to commit mass suicide, he was not at that moment

capable of stopping them. There was a more immediate problem to be solved. He waited another second to see if Amanda would finally speak, but she only stared out the window, one of her hands clenched into a fist.

"Amanda," he said quietly, switching off the viewscreen and rising, "what is...?"

"Sarek, I'm worried about Spock."

He nodded slowly and moved toward her, his concern growing. As he came up behind her, she glanced at him and then turned back to the window.

"What is it that concerns you, my wife?"

She faced him and her eyes - their blue color an eternal and pleasant surprise to him - looked into his squarely.

"It's hard to say," she began and paused. The dark shading of her eyes faded to the color of her Earth's sky as a smile grew in them and on her lips. "Do Vulcan children go through phases, Sarek?"

"Phases?" he answered, frowning in feigned incomprehension; but he couldn't fool her.

"You know what I'm talking about. A Human boy goes through stages...the 'terrible twos' and 'frightening fours'. Then they're okay for a little while until they hit their teens, at which point they turn into horrible traps for parents. Spock's seventeen now. Is he going through adolescence or something I don't know about?"

Sarek delayed his reply to read her face carefully. In spite of the playfulness of her words, he sensed an underlying nervousness, a wrongness, and he suspected the tone of her remarks was intended to disguise it. It had been a long time since Amanda had felt required to hide something from him in this manner. He looked over her shoulder out the window. The sun was sinking beyond the horizon.

"No, my wife. When a Vulcan child finishes his or her Kahswan, it is the signal that they will accept life from that time on in a logical manner. Of course, there is still knowledge for the individual to acquire, but the learning process is not punctuated by varying emotional moods or 'phases'."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Then I guess it's nothing...just my imagination."

"However, Spock is your son as well as mine. Perhaps the duality of his..."

"Sarek!" Amanda interrupted, firmly. "When Spock made his decision ten years ago, it was a total commitment. He has no 'dual' nature. He's a single, whole person who happens to have parents from extremely diverse cultures. That doesn't make him two people walking around in one body and if you can't see it..."

"Amanda," he said gently, stopping her flow of words with the ease of long practice. "I *can* see it. That is not what I had intended to say. Per-

haps the duality of his early upbringing could have affected him in the manner you have described as normal for a Human child. However, I do not believe it did. Let me ask you again. What is it that worries you about Spock?"

"It's nothing," she repeated. "It's just a... a feeling. And you know how you feel about feelings. I suspect I'm only having late maternal pangs or something. I'll be all right."

"Amanda, who was it who warned me about the Mahometan situation before any of the diplomats on the scene had recognized the danger?"

"Well," she murmured, turning away to open the window and take advantage of the breezes of early night that would begin to sweep the day's hot air from the city.

"And who is the individual who has lived in this house with Spock until she must know his every nuance as well as she knows her husband?"

He was still gazing out the window. Spock, a bulging pack slung over one shoulder, entered the formal garden and sat down on a bench. The boy had obviously been out on the desert again. Then Amanda, a smile glinting in her eyes, turned on the shaded lamp nearest them.

"Your emotional compass seems to be quite accurate," Sarek told her. "And I have reason to know you are an intelligent being. If you tell me that you have a feeling that something is 'wrong' with Spock, it would be less than logical for me to ignore your statement."

"Sarek," she said, laughing through the syllables of his name, "only you could put it that way."

He lifted a wry eyebrow and nodded briefly, watching her progress about the study - more slowly this time - as she switched on some lights. He was pleased that she seemed to have regained her normal spirits, but even as he thought it, something dimmed the glow on her face and caused her to stand motionless in the middle of the floor.

"Amanda?" For the first time in their discussion he attempted to use the mental communication link that had joined them for the last twenty years. It was not difficult to initiate a two-way awareness, but a strong and familiar emotion momentarily swirled through them, keeping him from coherent thought or movement. He retreated - staying close enough to lend support if it became necessary - and said her name again. She regained control, but her eyes still reflected anguish.

"My wife, do not..." he began, but she broke through his words.

"His early upbringing," she quoted bitterly. "I cannot help but think of it, husband. Yes, our son made his commitment; but...but he lived in this house with a not-quite-controlled Human mother for too many years of that childhood. I tried! I didn't hinder his understanding...did I?"

Sarek moved physically closer, but she straightened her back and stared at him, daring him

to touch her, denying her Human needs.

"My wife," he said, projecting the calmest and least emotional aura he could manage in the face of his concern for her. "Since the choice of direction for Spock's life was made, you have been an excellent partner for me in the task of instructing our child in the Vulcan way of life." His formality dissolved and he took one of her hands in his. It was icy cold. "Even before his Kahswan, it is my impression that you...loaded the dice...in my favor. Do you regret his choice?"

"No!" she said hurriedly. A rueful smile touched her lips. "Oh, maybe once, a long time ago, I wished that he had decided to honor *my* teaching...the way of life that ultimately brought me to Vulcan. But he did not, and there is absolutely *no* logic in crying over spilt milk!"

She squeezed the hand that held hers and lifted her free one to caress his cheek lightly before turning away. Sarek held to her hand, tightly, to keep her from going, and she looked back at him questioning.

"I shall remember your concern over Spock," he said firmly. "I had not noticed any alteration in his actions or words. I must observe more closely and with a more objective attitude."

"Yes," she murmured lightly, "objectivity is difficult when you are dealing with your son, isn't it?"

"Indeed, Amanda, but not impossible. After all, Spock is now within the first years of his young maturity. As a Vulcan he will be expected to begin to practice at his own discretion the analysis, synthesis and decisive action he has been taught."

"Oh, very impressive, my lord and master," she said in mock abjectivity. Then the pantomime was spoiled as a look of genuine alarm crossed her face. "What time is it?"

"It is three-quarters into the tenth hour, Amanda," he replied promptly.

"Oh, lord, I hope dinner is still okay. I'm trying a new dish tonight. I think Spock will like it. I know you will," she finished, going to the door and opening it. She wagged her fingers over her shoulder at him in farewell as she went into the hall.

Sarek remained where he was, watching her through the slowly closing door. She glanced quickly down the corridor leading to the front of the house and he guessed what had caught her eye.

"Spock," she said, projecting her voice with just enough volume to reach the far end of the hall. "Dinner will be served in fifteen minutes."

There was no answer, and Sarek frowned. He knew he would have heard one if it had come.

Amanda shrugged her shoulders in a fatalistic Human gesture and turned back toward Sarek. Leaning forward, she grasped the door panel and held it

from closing for one parting shot.

"Your son," she whispered emphatically, "is turning into an absent-minded professor."

Then she whisked out of sight.

Sarek stared blindly at the intricately carved door. The recent discussion played through his mind, verbatim, with every nuance and inflection intact, and he frowned again. He had not been flattering Amanda when he mentioned her Human instinct for 'reading' others. It was a characteristic she possessed that had proved to be an invaluable asset in his career as a diplomat. He thought of settling into meditation to review Spock's actions over the past few weeks, in an effort to recognize the elements that had caused Amanda's statement of concern. However, he also had to finish reading the Mahometan report.

He returned to his desk and reactivated the viewscreen, absently resuming his perusal of the information on the tape. At the same time, a part of his mind continued to roam through the problem Amanda had presented to him. Not only would he look with new eyes at his son for her sake...but also for Spock's. His thoughts drifted momentarily to the mosaic that decorated the floor in front of his desk. A large work, depicting some of Vulcan history and what part his ancestors had played in that story, it had been designed and executed during his grandfather's tenure as head of the clan.

Sarek frowned and gave his entire attention to the message tape for the next few minutes. It came to an end and, after deactivating the screen, he sat back and steepled his fingers at his waist. Why had he suddenly seen that picture? What was important about the particular scene he had viewed in that swift thought?

Abruptly, he rose and went around his desk to gaze down at the work. Details were difficult to make out in the uncertain lighting, but he knew the entire piece from memory, having learned some of his earliest lessons while seated on it. Also, he always took a moment - like Amanda - if the time presented itself, to survey the gleaming pattern of stones and tiles and reflect on the story it told; now, he could see it as though it were lit by a mid-day sun.

The large square had an elaborately styled border 100 centimeters wide, on which all the major pictures within were footed so that they marched smartly from corner to corner. Vast encampments, agricultural scenes, meetings between leader and leader; each portion of the tale was separated from the others by the ancient symbols of Surak's clan. However, Sarek spared little attention for that familiarity. Stepping onto the mosaic, he walked to the center and saw the scene that had disturbed him at his desk.

Here, encircled by a ring of stones the colors of the sunset, were three figures from life before the social revolution which had brought peace to the world. Going down on one knee, Sarek ran his fingertips over the smooth surface that protected the actual stones from both chipping and dragging childish feet. Once again, he saluted the skill of



the artist who had depicted the growth of a man in three successive stages. One small boy, clad in a simple loincloth, stood against the desert-colored background and against his lower ribs hung a triangular pendant. Two replicas of it, symbols of Sarek's and Spock's successful completion of the Kahswan, lay in one of the display cases on the shelves.

The next figure was bigger, indicating greater maturity, and to the single pendant was added a lirpa, the two-headed battle staff of the ancients. Triumphant, the youth clasped the weapon over his head, recognition of his acceptance as a warrior. The test of that had originally been decided by single-combat between the youth and an experienced warrior - usually, one captured during the incessant clan wars. Such battles were always to the death, and the prisoner's impetus for winning was the promise of adoption into the tribe.

The last of the three figures was the largest. He stood in the same position as the second, feet apart and weapon raised high in both hands. This time, however, the loincloth had been replaced by a kilt-like garment that reached to the knees, and the semi-circular blade of the lirpa was pointed straight at the sky. A woman crouched between the warrior's feet. Her back was to the observer, but no adult Vulcan had any difficulty in identifying her sex and the purpose of her inclusion in the scene. The paired figures were representative of the last of the life-trials, the pon farr, the Time of Mating.

Sarek allowed his gaze to return to the central figure. Spock's Kahswan had taken place ten years ago, and the boy would not face the pon farr for many more years. It was the symbol and status of the new-made warrior to which the father was now drawn. Slowly, he culled from his memory the legends of that portion of the maturation process. At any time from the first days of 'adolescence' - he winced inwardly at the Human term - until the last of that time some twenty years hence, a boy was expected to declare himself a defender and hunter for the tribe...by challenging a much stronger veteran of war. The youth who would not take such a step was banished to the desert to die; and it was thought that Surak had known this exile. But to the triumphant challenger came instant acceptance as an adult. After a naming ceremony, the s'r'tas, he was called brother by the other men and son by the chief.

On modern Vulcan, of course, such practices no longer existed. Since Surak's time it had not been necessary to continue the barbaric process designed to preserve for the tribe the largest and strongest gene pool in preparation for defense and/or conquest. But the ceremony of the s'r'tas was still performed...in private...without a cheering crowd of people intoxicated by battle and the smell of blood.

Sarek thought of the quiet ritual he had shared with his father. They had gone apart from the family, and it had been a thing of import, he remembered. From that day on, life had been his to command, and the responsibilities remained to this day. He knew they would continue. How had Storm, his father, known that he was old enough, ready to

carry those burdens that he had taken to himself in the time since then? Soon...soon it would be Spock who must face adulthood. How would Sarek know? And how soon? *How soon must it be...?*

Swiftly, he straightened from his kneeling position and looked about the room, mistrusting this sudden desperation. There was a familiarity to it. It had happened before...in the days before Spock's Kahswan - when Sarek had known that the outcome would tell if he had failed T'Pol and the Council decree that Spock should be raised as a Vulcan. Now this last time, Sarek had to fulfill his personal commitment to that Council Dictate. Spock, as an adult, would make his own decisions.

Sarek abruptly raised his head as his time sense gave him a warning nudge...dinner. Abandoning the mosaic, he went to the door, dimmed the lights from the wall control, and left the room.

Moving along the south colonnade, he caught sight of Spock crossing the courtyard on a diagonal course, and paused to watch the boy. Sarek was familiar with the tendency of young beings to shoot past that level of growth which allowed them full muscular control; but it seemed to him, nevertheless that Spock was constantly in imminent danger of completely outgrowing himself these days. The memory of Amanda's recurring dismay over their son's infinite appetite and the daily obsolescence of his sizing in clothes was amusing, but thought of her brought an end to his humor. What was it that had disturbed her...and led to Sarek's recent preoccupation with ceremonies from the past?

He unconsciously slowed his walk, but Spock - reaching the dining area first - waited for him. They entered the room together and Sarek sensed the boy's sudden tension as Amanda looked up and smiled at them. She was removing dishes from the temperature control unit and placing them on the table.

"Come on and help me, you two."

Quickly, with what should have been a minimum of effort, the three of them finished setting the table; but Spock's continued hesitation interfered with the pleasant routine. Sarek withheld comment and took his place at the table as Amanda with a broad flourish removed the cover of one dish.

"Voila!" she announced, placing it before him. "Does M'sieu wish to test ze specialitay de maison? Eet ees vferrrry good!"

Deliberately, Sarek raised one eyebrow and contemplated the offering. Its aroma and coloring were pleasant, but he looked back up at his wife without making a move to touch it. "Amanda, how can it be the specialty of the house...if the house has never served it before?"

With unnerving swiftness her face became calm and expressionless as a native Vulcan's, but humor glittered along their marriage bond as she replied, "I don't know! We'll work it out in rehearsal."

Sarek helped himself to a moderate serving of the dish. "And what is this marvel called?"

"Um...Deep-Dish Miscellanea." Amanda served

herself with trig sticks.

Sarek nodded and handed the dish he held to Spock.

"I invite you to partake of some Miscellanea, my son." He turned to accept the trig sticks from Amanda and an uneasy quiet fell. Sarek looked up again swiftly and exchanged a questioning glance with Amanda.

Spock was gazing at his plate. A long moment passed before he lifted his head. "I do not understand."

"What, Spock?" Amanda said softly, pushing the dish of red-cooked rem't toward him.

"A rehearsal," he stated flatly, "is the act of performing a specific set of actions in order to perfect the order and the performance of them. We are not...in rehearsal."

"Oh." She sat back and glanced at Sarek before answering. "I didn't realize you were unfamiliar with the saying. It's an idiomatic phrase - somewhat obscure I'll admit. I only said it...because...I couldn't think of...."

One carefully raised eyebrow was the only response to her explanation, and then Spock began spooning the 'Miscellanea' onto his plate.

Sarek intercepted one more glance from Amanda - this one filled with barely controlled pain and fury. Then she, too, applied herself to the food. Sarek had little inclination to eat the servings before him. What was happening? Had the whole tenor of their lives changed in the space of one day? Surely, Spock's transformation into this silent, overly literal...humorless being had taken longer than that. No, if it was a momentary aberration, Amanda would have waited for it to subside and might not have said anything to Sarek about it at all. While he considered the matter, he forced himself to consume the nourishment - the 'Miscellanea' was good; gradually, he realized that all conversation at the table had ceased.

"I observed your return from the desert, Spock," he said then in response to a completely unfamiliar inner need to fill the strained silence. "Was the afternoon's journey a profitable one?"

"Yes, sir. T'Rian has demonstrated some early methods of mineral identification without the use of mechanical devices. I wished to verify the degree of accuracy to be found in such procedures. Did you know that at one time our ancestors could only prospect for iron by means of visual search?"

Sarek's quizzically raised eyebrow momentarily halted the flow of words, but Spock soon recovered.

"I beg pardon, Father. Of course you are aware of the history of minerology on our world. It was of interest to me to conduct the activity in such a primitive manner; and I had 79.46 percent success in locating iron as well as tin. Naturally, the more common minerals such as gold were easily found by...."

As Spock continued, Sarek and Amanda again exchanged a glance, and from then on, the dinner hour passed smoothly. Spock's voice rarely ceased as he recounted his discovery of the veracity of his teacher's words. He dominated the conversation, unconsciously performing the final step of learning, the act of conveying to another his new-found knowledge.

Sarek listened carefully, augmenting the lesson at one point with personal experience, but aware of a disturbing pattern in the conversation. Amanda contributed little beyond the courtesies of 'please and thank you' to the dialogue between father and son. Of course, minerology was far from her field of expertise, but the few times she essayed a question to Spock, he invariably directed his reply to Sarek.

When they had finished eating, Amanda did not stay to participate in the continuing discussion but silently started clearing the table. Sarek rose to help her and suddenly, the tension in the room became overwhelming. He lost track of Spock's unfaltering monologue for a moment and briefly touched her hand. She was quivering like a new-strung lyre. Vaguely, he heard Spock's request for his presence on a short trip to the L'langon Mountains to investigate T'Rian's teaching further.

Absently, Sarek nodded agreement. Then he picked up the dish of 'Miscellanea' and handed it to his wife, saying, "This is a most pleasant variation, Amanda. Please repeat it in the future."

She accepted the dish from him but avoided any physical contact. Spock stood and, after some hesitation, spoke.

"My appreciation to you, woman-of-the-house, for a plentiful and nourishing meal." The comment was completely formal, the voice controlled, quiet and totally unrecognizable. "What are the contents of the strange dish provided?"

"Oh...miscellanea," Amanda said softly, looking down at the dish and then up at her son, bleakly. "It's a high-protein version of pizza. I'm glad you liked it."

Spock's face was a model of decorum and self-control. Before turning to the door, all he said was, "An Earth food."

"Spock!" Sarek's command stopped the boy just as the dish slipped from Amanda's hand and landed noisily on the floor. Sarek ignored the sound, watching the disapproving expression that flashed quickly across Spock's face as he glanced at his mother. Sarek felt rage swelling within him and he was grateful for Amanda's lightly restraining touch on his arm. He kept his gaze on her white, set face as he addressed Spock.

"Be prepared to commence our mountain journey after breaking fast tomorrow. We will leave in the first hour before sunrise."

Spock's face relaxed immediately. "Yes, sir. I shall be ready to accompany you. Good evening."

He left the room and Sarek slowly knelt to

help Amanda clean the dish and the messy food stains from the floor. The fury he was controlling made each muscle and nerve in his body painfully tight. Now he knew what had caused her concern... and only wondered that she had waited so long to speak of it. He watched her face as she wheeled the servo-cart from the room. *Amanda has been hurt and that I will not permit. But more importantly, such illogical behavior on Spock's part cannot continue. But what can be done?*

He allowed his thoughts to sink inward to the first level of meditation and it was there...a small bright thread of comprehension. It was faint and he began to sink deeper in the effort to localize it, to bring it to full, conscious realization within him. It would not be easy, but Spock was a responsive student. Sarek came out of meditation and headed for the kitchen area where he knew he would find his wife. She needed comforting to-night. He would begin to deal with Spock tomorrow; the camping trip had been a most fortuitous suggestion.



"Spock, why do you think we are each of us as we are? Were we deliberately made - created? Or is it mere chance that forms us?"

"Sir! I...I haven't considered the matter."

"I see. It would be of value if you were to do so, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

Across the southern face of Sharl in the L'langon Mountains clambered the debaters with the larger of the two in the lead. Their path meandered in apparent aimlessness with frequent pauses; and during one such Sarek, under cover of his ostensible study and recording of a geological fault, turned unobtrusively, to watch his son. Spock had sunk to one knee in order to supplement his own mechanical analysis with a close visual survey of the particularly unusual coloration of one rock.

His thin face was intent and serene, for he was well able to keep his expression neutral, withholding from public view any thoughts or emotions that might sway him. But thanks to Amanda's influence, especially as it pertained to Sarek's own people, he could read the boy's minutest change of mood. And since their departure that morning, Spock's mood had been one of unrelieved satisfaction - at a complete variance with the subdued manner in which he had bid farewell to Amanda. He had easily held up his end of the conversation so far, a debate on a number of topics, each following naturally from the one which preceded it. He had not even been disturbed by Sarek's introduction of a difficult philosophical question. All of this they discussed in the ancient Vulcan language that was valued for its precision and unchanging nature.

Sarek sighed and returned to the task of reading mineral oddities to be found here on the surface and for several miles beneath it. Later they would compare results and discuss the characteristics and usefulness of each of the mineral depos-

its. It was a method of joint investigation that father and son had perfected over the years. For ecological reasons Vulcans no longer extracted these relatively rare items from the face of their planet - obtaining them rather from other planets in the same system or from the people of other star systems - but such exercise in location and identification was of value to any student of the physical sciences. T'Rian's lesson was proving to be equal to the task.

"Father, in regard to your last inquiry...I have reached a point in my contemplations that is a paradox...unresolvable."

"Specify."

"It seems to me that, if we are created, this would of necessity argue a creator-being of respectable intelligence, for there is much logic in the universe...from the microcosm to the macrocosm. On the other hand, there is much that does not, to my knowledge, conform to the patterns of logic. This argues against the existence of a creating sentence."

"Indeed?" Sarek waited, but Spock only shook his head once, sharply, as though to settle some elusive thought into place. Sarek allowed the discussion to lapse...for the moment.

They continued, climbing higher onto the black face of Sharl. They followed no trail and as the day wore on, the way grew steadily rougher, crossing wide sheets of weathered lava beds whose smoothness had been repeatedly destroyed by volcanic action and earthquakes in the millions of years since the mountains rose and the copper sea had burned away leaving behind it the Sasashar Desert. There were valleys, gouged out of the mountainside by cyclone-force wind and sand storms, and in these, growing things softened the face of the L'langon range; but nothing grew higher than Sarek's waist. All life had to cling tightly to the rockground to struggle for its share of the sparse moisture far beneath the surface where the heat of the sun never reached. On the bare-faced parts of the mountain, mineral veins trailed thin lines of bright color - copper, gold, and the rare emerald - in dizzying abstract patterns that reflected the ecological forces that had shaped the land.

The people who lived there had also been shaped by those forces. At some point far back in time they had - by virtue of a superior, water-saving body chemistry - risen from four feet to two. Then they had followed the way of many other worlds and developed intelligence...culture...civilization, a civilization that retained many of its direct ties with nature. The survival test was one of those ties. The warrior-testing was another.

Night came swiftly in the mountains. Choosing a campsite, the two travelers lit a small fire as warning of their presence to any wild-life that might protest an invasion of its territory, and broke the day-long fast with the food Amanda had packed for them. Afterward, they settled in, listening to the small sounds of the night and following their own thoughts.

Sarek frowned at the stars spread in a glittering blanket across the sky and then glanced quickly at the boy seated opposite him. There was little need for concern. Apparently, Spock's entire attention was directed into the flames of the watchfire, and it seemed he had not noticed Sarek's involuntary grimace. *And why is it suddenly necessary to hide so slight a gesture from my son? Spock has seen me do it before. It is too late to attempt a facade of perfection.*

Softly, in deference to the peace of their surroundings, Sarek said, "If there is a creator-being, does that indicate a purpose planned for each individual life-force?"

"Predetermination, sir? That is a Human concept," the boy replied, easily picking up the theme he had introduced earlier.

"And for that reason you did not consider it," Sarek blandly offered the conclusion.

"Why, no, sir...I mean...." Spock took a breath, began to speak, and for the second time that day, seemed to think better of it.

Sarek allowed the silence to lengthen and held Spock's gaze with his own. Finally, he saw the boy swallow and his eyes shifted away from Sarek's.

"I merely stated a fact." It was a whisper.

"I see." Sarek nodded, surveying the signs of discomfort in his son. He had at last broken through Spock's unquestioning acceptance of... everything. "What can you tell me of the concept?"

Spock looked away from him and spoke slowly. "The beauty of the universe comes from the ability to perceive the widely diverse appearance and functions of its many parts."

"Non sequitur."

Spock's gaze snapped back to his father and then dropped once more to the fire between them. Sarek took a deep breath, unconsciously raising an eyebrow in satisfaction.

"Spock," he said quietly, returning the train of thought to its original track. "On the Sasashar the grains of sand go unnumbered and each appears to be much like its neighbors. Yet I would ask you: When the storms sweep the desert, does the wind lift the sand and carry it - a helpless captive - to far places; or does the sand ride the wild paths of its own volition?"

"But...but the sand is not sentient!" came the expected protest.

Sarek said nothing. The youth hesitated and then once more plunged recklessly into the discussion.

"Father, it is the action of the wind that forces the sand to move...and neither of them has a concept of 'faraway places'."

"Forces the sand to move?" Sarek said quickly. "You imply that the sand has a will that must be

coerced into compliance."

"No, sir," Spock denied, but then he sat back and was quiet for a long time.

"Spock," Sarek said after a while, switching from Vulcan to his wife's native language. "Spock, what is 'difference'?"

"S-sir?" the boy stammered in the same tongue. "Difference is...a word...denoting...an unlike state between two things. It is...*ti'am'g'ry*."

At the lapse, Sarek looked quizzically at his son.

"Your pardon," Spock said swiftly, reverting once again to English. "It is similar to the concept in Vulcan philosophy which deals with the existence of all living things as individuals...no matter how alike they may seem to be."

"I see," Sarek replied noncommittally, aware of Spock's unusual tension. "What constitutes a sentient being?"

"An awareness of self that includes the acceptance of others as equally unique individuals of value," Spock quoted promptly, obviously relieved at the apparent return to familiar lines of questioning.

Sarek chose his words carefully. "That is a remarkable point of view, my son."

Spock's gaze grew puzzled and then dropped to the ground once more under the weight of his father's stare.

"It...is the Vulcan definition," he said, softly.

Sarek held his position and kept his gaze on the boy. Spock glanced upward twice and both times looked away as soon as he met his father's eyes.

"Spock, do you know the concept of the *tabula rasa*?"

A frown drew a faint line between the boy's brows. He nodded.

"And what of Plato's 'Cave' theory?"

Spock raised his head, a tinge of desperation in his voice.

"Father, why do you ask these things? What is the purpose of this...discussion?"

Sarek held his face and body remote from any possibility of expressive movement; but something within him breathed easier.

"Why have you waited so long to ask?" he said simply.

"Sir! It is not my place...."

"Spock." The implacable voice carried as much weight with his son as with his wife. The boy stopped midword. "You are a Vulcan and a student

of the sciences. Do you recall your mother's book collection?"

Spock nodded again, accepting this new tangent at face value.

"It was very difficult to bring here as the volumes are old and most of them are now priceless. Do you know why I was adamant that she should bring them, make them a contribution to our household?"

"No, sir," came the faint reply.

"There is one book which takes its value from three things: the ideas of its author, its age, and the fact that the author at one time affixed his signature to it. It is called *More Than Human* and it was written by an Earthman, Theodore Sturgeon, in the twentieth century, as the Humans measure time. Have you read it?"

"Yes, sir." Spock's reply was stronger and he kept a fascinated gaze fixed upon his father.

"And do you remember the signature?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is a device the author added after his name. Tell me of it."

Spock looked out over the horizon, but Sarek waited, giving him time.

"It is a tailed circle, possibly the letter 'Q' of the English alphabet...and it is intersected by an arrow."

"Indeed. Do you know what it means?"

"No, sir."

"Your mother explained it to me when I inquired about it. It is simply that the author wished to remind himself and anyone who might see it, to 'ask the next question'...to seek further knowledge even when it seems that all knowledge must be within one's experience. Do you understand now why I have asked you these questions?"

"No, sir, not entirely." Spock paused. "However, I *shall* seek an answer."

Sarek nodded and then the conversation turned to the stated purpose of the expedition. Spock's responses were occasionally slow or preoccupied, but Sarek refrained from calling attention to this. When they finally lay down to sleep, though, he felt deep satisfaction. He had taught his son the Vulcan way, a way of knowledge at whatever price. Tonight Spock had exhibited the beginnings of a personal, deeper understanding of that philosophy. His father had no doubt that once the boy - young man - had given the matter full consideration, the question of Amanda's Humanity would be resolved... and then the s'r'tas could be considered. Sarek allowed himself to drift into sleep with one last thought. *Amanda will be pleased.*



Amanda was pleased. Upon their return home, the difference in Spock's attitude was immediately apparent, and in subsequent days and weeks it grew even more pronounced. She commented on it one afternoon in the privacy of Sarek's study, after kissing him lightly in an expression of mute gratitude he could not protest on the grounds of logic.

"I don't know what you did," she said, shaking her head, "but you did it! I'm so pleased that my Vulcan son has returned...I feel like celebrating!"

"Your 'Vulcan' son?"

"Yes. Curiosity incarnate. Do you know he has asked me more about Earth in the last few weeks than he has since I told him about snow when he was four?" She wandered around the room, idly lifting one small object after another, caressing each and then moving to something else. "What do you suppose he'll turn out to be? A physicist?"

"He will, of course, be welcomed at the Vulcan Science Academy."

She looked at him swiftly, her face suddenly grave. "You sound as though it's all settled."

"No, I merely state a fact," Sarek said, uncomfortably aware that he sounded like Spock.

"What if he should choose to do something else?"

"He will not. He is Vulcan. It is tradition. He is my son."

"Sarek...."

"Amanda, the question will not arise for some time. You know that Spock's life-choice must wait upon the recognition given in the s'r'tas. By the time of the ceremony it will be evident that he is an adult making his own choice."

She looked at him intently. "Are you considering the ceremony?"

"Yes."

Her expression didn't change and she caught her lower lip between her teeth before saying, "Which means you think he's ready for it."

"Amanda, I am considering it," he equivocated, and then wondered why he did so.

She smiled warmly and came to sit on the arm of his chair. "Well, I think you'd better hurry up!"

"Amanda, what do you...?"

She spread her arms wide in denial. "I know nothing. I say nothing. But I do love you."

Her hand stole around his neck for the second time that afternoon, and he began to put away his papers, abandoning the question. Her kiss on his cheek was sweet and cool; but the front door opened and closed and he stiffened. Immediately, she sat back and rose from her position, looking down at

him with a gently mocking grin.

"Someday he's going to have to learn that Vulcans know how to kiss, too."

"But not just at this moment," Sarek replied evenly as a knock came at the door. "Come!"

By the time Spock entered, Amanda was sitting in a chair beside the desk, comfortably settled as though she hadn't moved from it in hours. "Good afternoon, Spock," she greeted him, coolly. "Was your visit to Space Central interesting?"

Sarek raised an astonished eyebrow, but neither of the others appeared to notice. Nor did they volunteer to explain to him why Spock had not attended classes that day.

"Yes, Mother. I had not been there for many years. Much has changed. Some has not."

"Well, you can tell me all about your mysterious errand later," Amanda said, rising from her chair. "I'll see you..."

"Please stay. I have something to tell you both."

She sank back into her previous position and glanced at Sarek questioningly.

"Spock," he said quietly, reprimanding the lack of courtesy which had kept the other from giving him proper greeting.

Recalled to his duty, Spock came forward to stand before the desk in the traditional pose of a first-son, feet planted slightly apart, hands behind the back and the head carefully poised in a combination of deference to the elder and confidence of self. In addition, Sarek's quick survey of the boy elicited the information that his eyes were bright with suppressed excitement, his breathing a little faster than normal, and both stance and gaze were steady, forceful and proud. The entire picture gave Spock the look of a much older individual. Sarek steepled his fingers at his waist and nodded.

"K'riat."

"K'riatan."

"You wished to speak with us?"

"Yes, sir," Spock said promptly. "It is on the matter of my future. I have decided to prepare myself - through a specific period of study - for extensive investigation in the physical sciences."

Sarek nodded again and glanced at Amanda, knowing that only she would be able to read his pride. The look she returned to him carried a similar message but was tempered with an elusive apprehension. Somewhat subdued, he returned his gaze to Spock.

"It is an excellent field of study and of much value to our people, my son," Sarek replied. "I approve."

Amanda nodded.

"I am honored."

A silence fell then and of it was born tension. Sarek dropped his gaze to his steepled fingers and searched rapidly for the origin of this emotional state. His mind's eye, however, was filled with the image of the circle in the mosaic, and he recalled Amanda's laughter...her words....  
*"Well, you'd better hurry...."*

"Father?"

Sarek held up one hand for silence. He took a deep breath - his inner gaze still fixed on the figure of the newly-declared warrior/adult of pre-Reform times - and began, awkwardly.

"Spock, in five weeks time will be the ceremony of Staat."

"Yes, sir, I...."

Spock paused, again obeying Sarek's silent command for attention.

"At that time," he continued, "I propose that you and I journey to Dharien'g't and visit the Chamber of Inner Light...to celebrate the s'r'tas."

The tension immediately subsided. Amanda's face was glowing and Spock's held a very small fraction of that emotional light.

"Father, I..." Spock interrupted himself and then picked up the threads of the traditional response. "You honor me greatly. I follow in your path to return the gift to you."

"In the proper time and the proper place," Sarek murmured.

At last Spock looked toward his mother and Sarek saw an unspoken communication pass between them, Amanda accepting her son's joy and returning it multiplied...while she gave him the same steady-looking look she had directed at her husband.

Puzzled by the warning she seemed to convey, Sarek lifted his gaze to Spock...and saw the moment of realization and understanding that disturbed the younger Vulcan's expression and completely dimmed the glow that had momentarily shone there.

"Father, I...I," he stammered, and there came to his eyes a plea for understanding...for help... a yearning for freedom of expression that neither of them could admit. "Father, I would request... with all due honor and respect...that the date... of the s'r'tas be...be moved forward by at least one week."

His last words were a rush of syllables that had less meaning than Amanda's soft, wordless cry as they entered Sarek's mind together. Transmuted from the pride he should not have felt, anger rose inexorably within him - so strong he could only hold to it without hope of control. He clamped bonds on his body and voice to keep them from fulfilling the promise of that fury.

"You presume..." He stopped. Stood. Used the movement - slight as it was - to regain some sense of reason and self. Amanda had risen with him and took a step closer, but he held her apart from him with one swift glance. "You realize, I assume, that this goes against our traditions and all that I have taught you."

Spock's face went white. "I know."

"You know? And yet you make the request." Sarek's voice was a harshly controlled whisper.

"It is important," was Spock's only reply. He stared at his father as though he was unfamiliar...alien...or changed.

Sarek felt the same uncertainty. *Why...?* Somewhat calmer, he put the question to the boy. "Explain."

Spock's eyes came back to life as he leaned forward eagerly, color returning slowly to his features.

"Yes, sir. It was our last discussion on the desert that started my train of thought, and it took me some time to investigate all the avenues you had suddenly opened. I...I had always determined that, when the time came, I would attend the Science Academy under a course of study that would fit me to assist you in your work. I had thought this would be a full and meaningful life and - and would be acceptable in the eyes of Vulcan."

Sarek's concentration split into two parts. One listened to Spock's words... *"...had determined...would attend...Academy..."* and watched Amanda, who was watching Spock in wonder and obvious fear. The other, larger part was given wholly to the difficult task of keeping his reactions from becoming noticeable. His anger had not abated...and the words of his son seemed merely to emphasize the problem rather than alleviate it.

Spock had not stopped. "However, when I found the pattern and logic within your questioning on the desert, I realized that - that to follow such a course would be a detriment to my full growth as a member of this society. You made me see some of the truths behind Vulcan philosophy...truths I had refused to allow myself...to perceive. I am a Vulcan. I follow Surak's way. But I am also...the child of a Human woman."

He glanced at Amanda - apology offered and accepted - and then faced Sarek again.

"You see, Father, I had to ask myself: Can I be a Vulcan, truly, if I am not aware of the diverse elements that make up what I am? I decided that partial knowledge was not enough and I should search...should 'ask the next question'."

He turned to look out the window and Sarek hesitantly began to relax. He had, indeed, succeeded in his intent on the desert. Spock would be prepared for the s'r'tas by the time he had finished exploring his mother's people. A small, only partially vanquished flame was relit...*the s'r'tas...tradition binding...tradition defied...?*

"And so, Spock," he asked as soon as he could trust his voice, "what is the next question?"

The boy turned swiftly and resumed his ritual stance. "Where can I receive the most complete, truest knowledge of Humans...how they act toward one another and why? And - lacking a unifying philosophy - they have as many answers to that question as there are Humans, it seems. I have spoken to Mother many times in the past weeks, and she is always willing to talk about it, but she *is*...you are my mother." An eager black gaze met the gentle blue one. "Are you a typical Human? After all, you embraced Vulcan ways many years ago, before I was born. I decided that my search would have to be extended farther. So, I asked myself the same question...in a slightly different form. Where could I go to carry out my own research on the matter, to form my own opinions, to experience for myself...what it means to be a Human...although I am a Vulcan? And so, I made my decision and acted upon it. Father, the reason for my request is this: I must report to Starfleet Academy in four weeks."

"Must?" Sarek echoed, bewildered by this strange turn.

"It is my duty. I have applied and been accepted as a first-level cadet."

"Oh, Spock!" Amanda's voice held surprise and joy...and worry.

Sarek knew that last was for him. He stood frozen...possessor of all knowledge...and ruler of nothing, least of all his mind. Warring factions made a shambles of his thoughts. Spock's reasoning was logical, a direct result of Sarek's teaching. But - Sarek knew this beyond a doubt - his own intention had been to give Spock the basis for a life here...on Vulcan. He could not leave...but he should have the knowledge he sought. *I have known Humans...lived among them. He has known only Amanda. Spock has chosen to go...but will he not be disgusted...appalled...? Will he stay...?* Sarek closed his eyes briefly, feeling the weight of both gazes...Spock's still pleading, Amanda's also asking for his understanding. He had only a moment for decision and planning...*and all of time for regret if I fail.*

"You would leave this house, this world, this place of peace," he began, "and go to war?"

Spock's reply came quickly, obviously rehearsed. "No, sir, Starfleet is an instrument of force only in the last resort. They are primarily explorers and the majority of them are Human. I will learn the ways of my mother's people so that I may accept our differences."

"I ask that you attend the Vulcan Science Academy, pursuing your studies in physics there."

"But the Science Academy is peopled by Vulcans. I would not be able to accomplish that other portion of my goal."

"It is unacceptable. You will obey me." He could see that Spock had not expected a denial. A conflict raged clearly across the younger man's

race. Amanda, too, had not expected it.

"Sarek, wait! It isn't necessary to..."

"Amanda!"

"Mother, please do not..."

Faced with the double protest, she subsided; but Sarek could see anger and hurt in her. And when he sent a tentative strand out along their bond, she projected all of her emotions at him so that he had to retreat.

"Father..."

Sarek held up his hand. "Before you speak, I have two things further to say. You turned away my first question by quoting to me the public fact that Starfleet is intended as an exploring group."

"It is," Spock interrupted quickly. "Father, the science officers and personnel on every ship in the fleet are respected and valued for their expertise and for the knowledge they bring to the rest of the Federation."

Sarek heard him out in a silence he kept firmly neutral. "However, there is an unpublished and routinely ignored fact that Starfleet's ships are armed with the 'finest' in military weapons and that they frequently meet circumstances in which those weapons are used. To kill. Other living beings." He spaced the words with deliberate emphasis. "Spock. You would be required to act in their way...under their beliefs. Would you kill? Are you capable of that act?"

"I don't...know!" Spock said, his voice no more than a whisper. "But I would learn."

"You would learn to kill. That would be your duty," Sarek continued, implacably. "If you disobey me..."

"Sarek, no!"

"Wife!"

"You can't!"

"Be silent." And when she would have disregarded that: "Kroykah!" The command was unanswerable. She stared from him to Spock and back again. Then she went to the window and turned away from them both. But Sarek still heard a soft litany of defiance.

"No, no, no..."

He faced Spock. "I cannot countenance disobedience. You will no longer be my son."

He had not seen so much naked emotion in Spock's face since he had passed his Kahswan. The boy opened his mouth, but no words came. He shook his head and swallowed hard, looking frantically around the room. Inevitably, his gaze came back to his father. And Sarek felt the first of the painful backlash he could expect from this act...*but not so much!*

"Then you will disobey me?" he said with steady, forced control.

Spock turned sharply away, every line in his body revealing unbearable tension, and for a long time there was silence between them. Finally, the younger man faced him, lifting his gaze in a gesture of desperation and...determination. His voice did not betray that conflict.

"I must."

Sarek heard Amanda's gasp. He spoke only one word and that, dispassionately. "Go."

Spock lifted his head, stung, and turned to comply with the order.

"Spock, no!"

Suddenly, Amanda was around the desk and standing between them, one hand on Spock's arm, staying him, the other reaching out to Sarek...as was her mind.

"Sarek...husband, please. I thought you understood. Is this not the Vulcan way? That he should question and seek his own answers? Sarek, you cannot do this to him. You cannot do it to yourself."

"Mother."

"Amanda."

Again they spoke in unison and each paused, giving her time to begin again.

"I will not stand for this. Sarek, will you force me to choose between you as you force him? Let him go...but not in anger...please, not in anger."

"Amanda. I do not know anger. It is decided. Let him depart."

"No! Spock..."

"Mother, I cannot stay. Is this anger I feel? It is...a hurtful thing."

He removed her hand from his arm and started for the door. She made to follow, but he turned back in the nearest thing to panic that Sarek had ever seen in him.

"Do not come. Stay. Stay here...Mother...stay...."

Amanda stared at him and finally nodded. "I will be here...always."

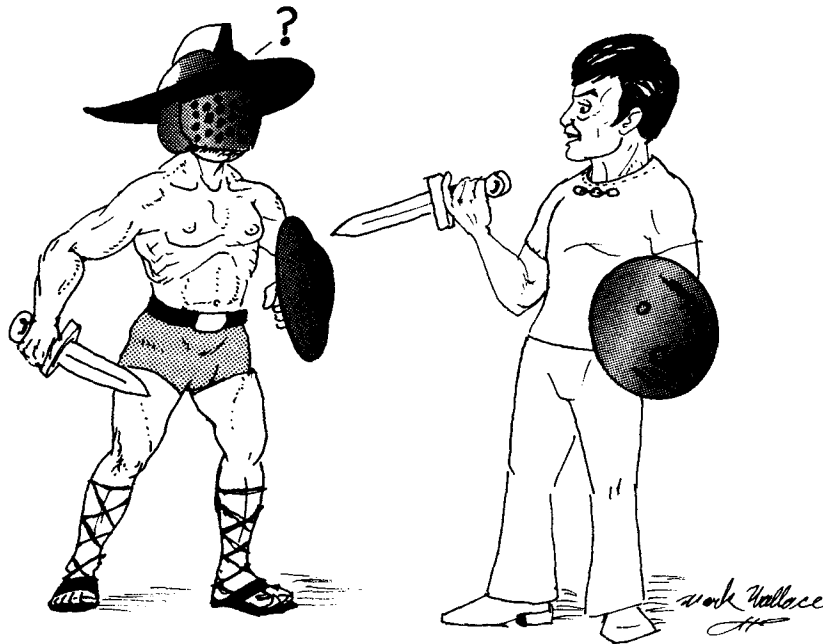
This time it was Sarek who illogically tried to delay the inevitable. "Spock. You are not Human."

Four daggers of accusing grief - L'langon black and Earth-sky blue - stabbed into Sarek. The reply was formal, distant.

"Neither am I a Vulcan."

He was gone. Amanda's bewildered, furious sorrow filled the room. The pain had already started, but now it crescendoed; Sarek did not... could not know if the wound of severance would ever heal. The challenge had been delivered...he had accepted. The battle was begun...and at the end

awaited death...or life and the Naming. Duty was a harsh master, but young Iemathyas did not learn to hunt and survive by staying in the den. They fled from their parents into a violent school; and those who lived were strong.



"Say, I have a friend in the Society for Creative Anachronism who'd love to meet you."

# UNIVERSES

Visions of cloudlike cities  
painted across the sky,  
rolling hills and valleys  
and a river drifting by.

Beyond the known horizon  
are castles out in space,  
alien forms and cultures,  
each a blossoming race.

Go beyond the similarities  
and take a different view,  
accept the fact that others  
may not think the way you do.

And then, behind the differences  
see how we are the same--  
peoples striving to achieve  
comfort, wealth and fame.

A million million specks of light  
adorn the midnight sky.  
We may never visit half of them,  
then again, we just might try.

*Fern Marder*



# SEARCHING

Everyone  
wants  
needs  
Searches for  
a  
loyal and true  
Best  
Friend

Not  
finding  
one  
We admire  
others  
who have been  
So  
Successful

Not  
with  
jealousy  
But with  
love  
wishing you always  
The  
Best

Live  
long  
and  
Prosper, we  
say  
and, peace and  
Long  
Life

*Merlin Thomas*

# The Strange Case of the Body on the Bed

RAYELLE ROE

McCoy's summons brought Kirk and his engineer Scott to the sickbay door at the same time. Scott followed his captain in. McCoy was waiting, a look of thinly veiled amusement on his face.

"What's up, Bones?" Kirk demanded.

"I want you two to see something. You're not going to believe it." McCoy ushered his fellow officers through the door to the examination room. Just inside, Kirk and Scott stopped, stunned.

"What's that?" Kirk gasped.

"That's Spock," McCoy replied glibly.

Kirk shot him a "don't be cute" look and rephrased his question. "What's that on him?"

The hapless Vulcan was lying on his stomach on the examination table. His lank body was covered only by a thin sheet. His chin was propped on one hand and his shoulders, back, chest - what Kirk could see of it - and arms were covered with small green blotches.

"Well, to be precise, it's an allergy more or less resembling hives," McCoy explained.

"How? What? Where? I mean, Vulcans usually don't have allergies, do they?"

"No, Jim, not as a rule. But then Spock doesn't fit the usual mold. He's one of a kind. Anyway, it's all over him." To illustrate his point, McCoy pulled back the sheet. "Look at his fanny. Kind of reminds me of a rainforest as seen from the air." Admiration for the spectacle tinged his voice.

"Gentlemen, if you are quite finished." One long, green-speckled arm reached out and retrieved the sheet.

"Aye," agreed Scotty. "I mind a tatooed lady I saw..."

A pointed look from Spock reminded Scott that the Vulcan outranked him and he thought it politically expedient to drop the sentence.

Kirk bent over his first officer. "Are you all right? Does it hurt?"

"No, Captain, but it is somewhat uncomfortable."

"He means, it itches like hell," added McCoy.



"How did it happen?" Kirk started to touch one of the blemishes with an experimental finger and thought better of it.

Spock wrapped the sheet tightly around himself and sat up. "Yesterday when I lost my footing and slid down that embankment, I landed in a patch of coriolandrius. This morning when I awoke..."

Kirk turned to McCoy. "Can you cure it?"

"'Fraid not, Jim. All I can do is make Spock comfortable until the rash fades. That's why you're here, Scotty. I've got the lab mixing up a little concoction that should do the trick. Spock is going to need to bathe in it. I need you to install a bathtub in sickbay."

"Doctor, Mr. Scott, I would prefer that the tub be installed in my quarters."

"Where would you put it?" McCoy demanded. "There's not enough room in the head to turn around, let alone build a bathtub."

"I wouldna' hav' ta put th' beastie in th' bathroom. I could put it in th' main room 'n' run some piping...wi' the captain's permission o'course."

"Go right ahead, Scotty. One thing this starship doesn't need is a first officer with the twitches."

Scott exited, passing Chapel coming in with a large bottle of brilliant purple liquid. "Doctor, here's the lotion."

"Thanks, Chris, just set it right here. Spock, bathe at least twice a day and try to stay

immersed at least fifteen to twenty minutes. Soak more often if the itch becomes really annoying. Don't scratch it. Scratching could spread the rash. Just remember, when it itches: soak, don't scratch."

"Dr. McCoy." Spock drew himself up stiffly. "May I remind you that I am capable of a great deal of control over my body. I will not scratch because I will not permit myself to itch. Now, will you please hand me my pants...."



Scotty had assumed that constructing a tub would be a simple matter when he'd left the task to a couple of novice engineers. But while the young men could probably tear the ship's engines apart and put them back together blindfolded, they'd never been asked to be plumbers before.

When the bulkhead pipes had burst on deck five, drowning out the junior officers' Friday night poker game, Scott came storming up from the engine room, bluing the air with gaelic curses, and taking charge of the situation.

Spock was trying to work at his desk amid all the confusion of Scott's juryrigged bathtub. Plastic hoses had been run from the bathroom, out its door, across the ceiling; from there they hung down to connect with the makeshift tub. One hose would supply water to the tub, the other would drain it. The tub itself was actually the bottom half of a storage barrel, **PROPERTY OF THE USS ENTERPRISE** proudly stamped on its side. It was not beautiful but it would be functional when finished.

Spock sighed inwardly as somebody dropped a wrench with a resounding clang. It was difficult

to work under these conditions, and there was this annoying itch below his left shoulder blade. Unconsciously he began to rub his shoulder against the back of his chair. The resultant relief made him abruptly aware of what he was doing. He looked up to see if anyone had noticed, but no one had.

The door chimed and Kirk entered. "Evening, Scotty." He was holding a small closed box. "How's it coming?"

"We're just finished the noo, Sir. Now Mr. Spock can soak his puir wee backside to his heart's content."

Spock's eyebrows shot up and Kirk chuckled.

Collecting his tools, Scotty shepherded his crew out the door. "Sleep well, gentlemen."

As the door closed behind them, Kirk grinned at his first officer. "How's the scourge, Spock?"

"It hasn't spread," Spock offered noncommittally. Under the shelter of his desk, he was busily scratching the calf of one leg with the pointed toe of the boot of the other.

Kirk offered the box. "I brought you a present."

A smile touched Spock's lips. "Another one, Jim?" Three weeks ago he had mentioned that Vulcan children were not given birthday or Christmas presents. Ever since, the captain had been busily giving him useless little presents. Spock had enjoyed the gifts.

"I spent the whole evening in inorganic constructions trying to get one just right."

Spock reached into the box and pulled out the contents. "What is it, Jim?"

"That, Mr. Spock, is a genuine, Earth-style, rubber duckie, for your bathtub. Just like the one I had when I was a kid."

Spock's smile disappeared.

Kirk continued. "I took the liberty of naming him for you. They have to have names."

Spock turned the yellow duck carefully. He'd never seen one before. "His name?"



"Well, in honor of the occasion, I named him Spot."

"Most appropriate. And what does one do with a rubber duck?"

"You float him on the water, and every once in a while, when the notion takes you, you grab him and squeeze him and listen to him squeak."

"I see. A highly productive activity, no doubt."

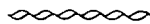
"Don't knock it until you try it." Kirk punched him playfully. "See you in the morning. Now, go soak your puiir wee backside."

"Goodnight, Jim. Sleep well."

As soon as Kirk was out the door, Spock began to rub his chest absently.

The Vulcan was not normally inclined to sensual pleasures, but the bath felt marvelous. He immersed himself clear up to his shoulders and breathed a very unVulcan-like sigh of relief.

"Spock, my quarters, on the double." Kirk's voice leaped out at him from the intercom.



"I came in, and went straight to the shower. I didn't bother to turn the light on. Then when I did... Spock, a sight like that can age you ten years."

The body lay on its back, staring at the ceiling with wide open sightless eyes. It was a man about sixty years old, dressed in a faded flight jacket, striped trousers of Andorian silk, and barefooted.

"Captain, are you sure he's dead?"

"Yeah, I touched him and he's cold. Where in the hell is McCoy and that security team I ordered?"

The mention of McCoy's name started Spock thinking. "Perhaps, it is one of the doctor's jokes. His idea of humor can be somewhat bizarre at times."

Kirk considered briefly. "Naw, Bones has done some weird things but he wouldn't put a corpse in my bed."

"I did not mean to imply that he would put a real corpse there. I thought it might be one of those cadavers, the artificial ones that are used to train the new medical orderlies." Spock approached the bed and studied the occupant carefully. "No, this is a real corpse!" It took quite a bit to surprise the Vulcan. This did it. "How did it get here?"

"I told you; I don't know."

The security detail arrived, followed by a bleary-eyed McCoy. "You know I don't usually make

house -- WHAT IN BLUE BLAZES IS THAT?"

"That, Doctor, is a corpse," Spock responded.

"I know that, but how did it get here?"

"I haven't the foggiest...Bones?" Kirk had an uncomfortable thought. "What did it -- he -- die of?" He hoped it wasn't something contagious.

McCoy had already begun to examine the body. He tried lifting one arm, testing it for rigor mortis. He checked the eyes, mouth and torso. Finished with that, he rolled the corpse on its side, and then back again. "Jim, this man's been murdered!"

"What?!"

"I'd say that about two or three hours ago somebody bashed him on the head with the proverbial blunt instrument."

"Who is he, Bones? Do you recognize him? Is he a crewmember?"

"No."

"Get that body down to sickbay and find all you can about him. Check on his i.d. Also get his fingerprints. And his teeth. Check his teeth. We'll run them through the ship's personnel records and see what we come up with."

"Spock, you go with McCoy. And get the clothes. I want to know where he's been. If we can figure that out, we might be able to determine how he got here." Kirk turned to the three men in the security detail. "Banning, you round up everybody who was on duty during the second watch and get them to the briefing room. I want to question them."

"Sorenson, search this ship. Search pattern Alpha. And Murray, you search my room. Also get someone down here to take the sheets and spread off the bed and get me some clean ones." Kirk paused at the door. "On second thought, Ensign, have them change the mattress, too."



McCoy sat in the pathology lab eating doughnuts and surrounded by various jars containing the organs of the deceased. Kirk had become hardened by his years in space -- but eating doughnuts! His stomach twisted slightly.

"Sure you don't want one, Jim?"

"No, thanks, Bones." Kirk gestured vaguely at the containers. "Did you find out anything?"

McCoy dunked his doughnut into the glass of milk at his elbow. "Only that my original theory was correct. Somebody bashed him. Cause of death: terminal dents."

Kirk eyed the canister in which the victim's brain was floating. His stomach turned once more. "Any idea who he is?"



"Nope. I sent his prints and dental records down to the records officer. She checked and double-checked. He's never been on this ship either as a crewmember or a passenger. Until now. I guess he's a passenger now."

"I'm having Scotty run a check of the Intruder Alert System. Just in case. Someone in this crew killed that poor old man and dumped him. And that scares me. Whoever did this is deranged and could pose a threat to the safety of the rest of this crew and the ship."

"I'll start going over the psych profiles - although I doubt if we'll find anything. If there'd been the slightest hint in their profile, they'd never have been allowed in Starfleet."

"Yeah, I know, but people do change. Look at Ben Finney." He paused. "And this poor, old guy. Why would someone hate him enough to kill him?"

"Well, whoever did it needn't have bothered. The guy was dying anyway." He picked up a jar and waved it under Kirk's nose. Something awful was floating inside. "Worst liver I've seen in years. He drank like a fish. Sure you don't want a doughnut? There's one here filled with strawberry jam."

Kirk scrambled to his feet. "Er-uh, no, thanks. I-uh have to go." He looked a little green around the gills.

The door closed behind him, cutting off McCoy's chuckles.

Spock returned to his quarters after having spent the entire night in the physical science lab analyzing the victim's clothing - without results. It was somewhat frustrating. And to add insult to injury, the itching had become worse. It felt as though a million insects were crawling across his skin. He should have been able to control it, but concentrating on the itch only made it worse. All night long he'd thought longingly of another soothing bath. At times he thought he might slip away for a few minutes, but his captain wanted information and it was Spock's job to supply it. The irony of the situation was that if he'd asked Jim, the captain would have readily given him permission to leave. But he couldn't ask, not after the smug remarks he had made in sickbay. *Pride goeth before the fall*, Spock mused as he peeled off his shirt. *Sometimes humans can be very astute.*

He inspected his splotched physique in the mirror. So far the rash had not spread to his face, but it extended to most of his chest and arms. He wasn't on duty for another 2.7 hours and Spock intended to spend every minute of the remaining time soaking.

He drained the cold water from the tub, and then began to refill it. He poured a liberal amount of McCoy's medicine in, and began stripping off the remainder of his clothing.

The intercom buzzed. His human side and his Vulcan side warred over whether or not he would answer it. His Vulcan side won.

"Spock here."

"Mr. Spock, Corelli, bio-labs," the speaker identified. "Sir, you left orders that you were to be notified when the gontillian crystals had reached the critical stage."

"On my way."

Spock turned off the water and activated the drain. For a second he stood and watched the healing waters flow out. "Damn," he muttered under his breath, and was instantly surprised that he should choose to vocalize his irritation with that particular word.



James T. Kirk, of the *USS Enterprise*, was thoroughly miserable. He'd been so busy the night before that he'd had little time for sleep, and when he had managed to make it back to his quarters, he'd been unable to sleep. Visions of his ex-roommate kept flashing through his mind.

First Officer Spock was equally miserable - but for entirely different reasons. He itched all over; even those parts of his body not covered by rash seemed to itch in sympathy. It took every ounce of his iron will not to squirm in his seat. He thought about asking to be relieved of duty temporarily, but that would necessitate an explanation in front of the entire bridge crew. He sighed inwardly, cast a longing glance at Uhura's long fingernails, and resolved to ignore the itch as long as possible.

Help, in the form of Doctor McCoy, came through the turbolift door. He bounced into the well of the bridge and took up his accustomed place at the captain's elbow.

Spock moved to join them, not because he was delighted to see McCoy, but because he had to move or go stark raving mad.

"So, how's the investigation coming, Sherlock?" McCoy grinned at Kirk. "Have you arrested the ship's butler yet? Shall I round up all the suspects and tell them to meet you in five minutes in the drawing room? Have you checked to see if the telephone wires have been cut?"

Now Spock was sure he'd gone insane. He had not understood one single word the doctor had said.

Kirk interrupted the chief surgeon's monologue. "Bones, this thing is driving me crazy. We've torn the ship apart and have come up with absolutely nothing. We've talked to off-duty and on-duty personnel and they don't know any more than we do. Why I--" He broke off, realizing that McCoy was not listening. Instead, the good doctor was eyeing Spock curiously. Kirk turned and began to study the Vulcan as well.

The Vulcan was standing as he usually did, hands clasped behind his back. However, this time one shoulder was hunched slightly higher than the other and he was staring at the viewscreen with an odd, lost look on his face. Abruptly he noticed the two pairs of eyes fastened on him and hastened to straighten his peculiar posture.

"How's the rash?" McCoy asked. Before Spock could reply, the doctor leaned across and pushed Spock's sleeve back. The angry green splotches were everywhere. "Uh-uh, just as I thought. I bet you didn't follow my instructions and now that blasted thing has spread."

Kirk felt a twinge of guilt; in all the excitement, he'd forgotten about Spock's problem.

"There simply wasn't time, Doctor." Spock retrieved his arm and pulled the sleeve back in place.

McCoy dropped his voice to a whisper. "Listen, Spock, I'm not kidding. This rash is only going to get worse. Now, if you don't take care of it, I'm going to confine you to sickbay and let Chapel give you sponge baths."

A look of alarm flew across Spock's face. Given the choice of Chapel or the rash, he'd prefer the rash. "That will not be necessary, Doctor," he hissed under his breath.

"Bones, it's my fault. I kept him hopping all night. I'm sorry, Spock. I guess I just forgot. You have my permission to leave the bridge. You're off duty, beginning now."

"Very well, Captain." With a brief nod Spock turned and walked, with his accustomed dignity, toward the turbolift, oblivious of the curious glances from the junior officers. But, when the doors slid shut behind him...

Kirk turned to McCoy. "I wish I could have that much control. He tells himself it doesn't itch, and it doesn't. Must be nice." He stood up and stretched lazily. "I think I'll go see how Scotty's getting along with dismantling the Intruder Alert System. Could it be that someone brought that body on board and we missed finding him? Mr. Sulu, you have the conn." He stopped in front of the doors. "Lt. Uhura, cut the connection to Mr. Spock's quarters. I don't want him disturbed for anything less than a red alert."

All through the journey to engineering Kirk pondered the mystery. *It just doesn't make any kind of sense. Who was that old man? I'll find that out sooner or later, but I hope it's soon. Uhura's sent copies of his prints to Starfleet's Records Section. So it's just a matter of time until they identify him. Maybe then I'll find out which member of my crew has had past connections with him. And how did that crewman smuggle the body aboard? No! Wait! They couldn't have smuggled that body aboard. The old man had only been dead three hours or so when I found him. Therefore he must have been alive when he came on board. That opens up a whole new can of worms. When did he come on board? Yesterday, from Canalupe? No, it couldn't be; sensors showed no signs of intelligent life. Six weeks ago at Starbase 6? No, there's no way to hide anyone for six weeks, not on my ship. That rules out the theory that it was a crewmember. The timing's all wrong.*

*And that puts me right back on square one. If someone other than a crewmember tried to come on board, the Intruder Alert would have gone off*

*automatically. There have been times when entities had slipped past, but they were alien life forms. This corpse was definitely human. So whether he came aboard under his own power, or was carried aboard by person or persons unknown, the IAS would have...Hold on a minute. No one had to bring him - he could have - corpses don't activate intruder systems. Lord, with a brain like mine, how'd I ever make it out of the Academy?* He all but ran to the nearest intercom, intending to rouse Spock to hear his idea, but he remembered his own orders. If he wanted Spock, he'd have to go to the Vulcan's quarters. Kirk hit the intercom. "Uhura, get me Scott."

With quick efficiency, the connection was made.

"Scott here."

"Scotty, forget the IAS. I want you to find out if anything was beamed aboard at about 1900 hours yesterday."

"But, Captain, we would have detected a transporter beam."

"Not if it wasn't on full power."

"Aye, Sir. You're right. It wouldna hav' to be full power if the person on th'other end didna care what shape th' package arrived in. Aye, that must be it. I'll check and report back. It'll be no trouble a'tall."

"I'll be in Spock's quarters. His intercom's not working, so you'll have to meet us there." He closed the connection to engineering and re-opened the channel to the bridge. "Uhura, tell Chekov to go back over the tapes from yesterday and see if our sensors detected any ships within transporter range of the *Enterprise*."

Ship's sensors were programmed to ignore reporting anything that was supposed to be in the vicinity and since the part of the quadrant the *Enterprise* was presently assigned to was fairly well traveled, they could have passed several ships the day before and been totally unaware of them as long as that ship was of Federation registry.



Kirk barreled into Spock's quarters without waiting for permission. Normally, the captain wouldn't do that, but he didn't want to disturb Spock. So he just barged in and found his first officer scrunched as far down into the tub as he could get. The only parts of him visible were his head and his knees. Spock's eyes widened perceptibly in astonishment.

Salutes having been abolished, it was the custom to stand when the captain entered the room - and Spock was a great believer in custom. But to stand, stark naked, dripping wet, in the middle of a bathtub...He couldn't - but he was supposed to! Reluctantly, he began to get to his feet.

Kirk recognizing Spock's dilemma said "Don't

bother getting up."

Spock sank gratefully beneath the surface once more. "You had something you wished to discuss, Captain?"

"This murder. I don't know the who and the why, but I've figured out the where and the how."

Sometimes Spock wondered if those who had taught him to speak English had inadvertently left gaps in his education. He had no idea what his captain had just said. "Specify."

"Look, we've been way off base."

"Base?"

"We've assumed all along that the *Enterprise* was the scene of the crime. But it wasn't. That old boozier--"

"Boozier?"

"--was beamed on another ship--"

"Beamed?"

"--and transported here, at a low frequency, a frequency so low that it wasn't detected. A frequency that low is seldom used; it's too dangerous. So the corpus delicti was beamed aboard right under the computer's nose, so to speak."

"Captain, did you just say that you believe that the victim might have suffered his fatal injuries while in the company of other people on board another vessel, and that the assassins then removed the body to the *Enterprise* by employing transporter circuits C and E?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar that that's the way it happened."

"Bottom dollar?"

The conversation was interrupted by McCoy springing through the door.

"Just stopped by to see if you were behaving yourself, Spock."

Kirk perched on the edge of the bathtub and shoved a chair in McCoy's direction. "Bones, listen. I think I've got it figured out."

As Kirk finished explaining to the doctor, the door signal buzzed. "That must be Scotty; I told him to meet me here."

"Mr. Scott?" Spock said with a note of dismay in his voice. No one paid any attention to him.

Scott perched on the corner of the desk. "Aye, Captain, you figured it right enough. That body was beamed aboard--"

The door buzzed again.

"Now who can that be?" McCoy asked.

Before Spock could open his mouth to say that

regardless of who it was he would prefer that they remain outside, that baths were supposed to be a matter of personal privacy, and that he would like to suggest that this conversation be removed to the briefing room, McCoy yelled, "Come in."

Uhura entered. Spock rapidly checked the transparency of the water and wished fervently for the concealing comfort of a washcloth.

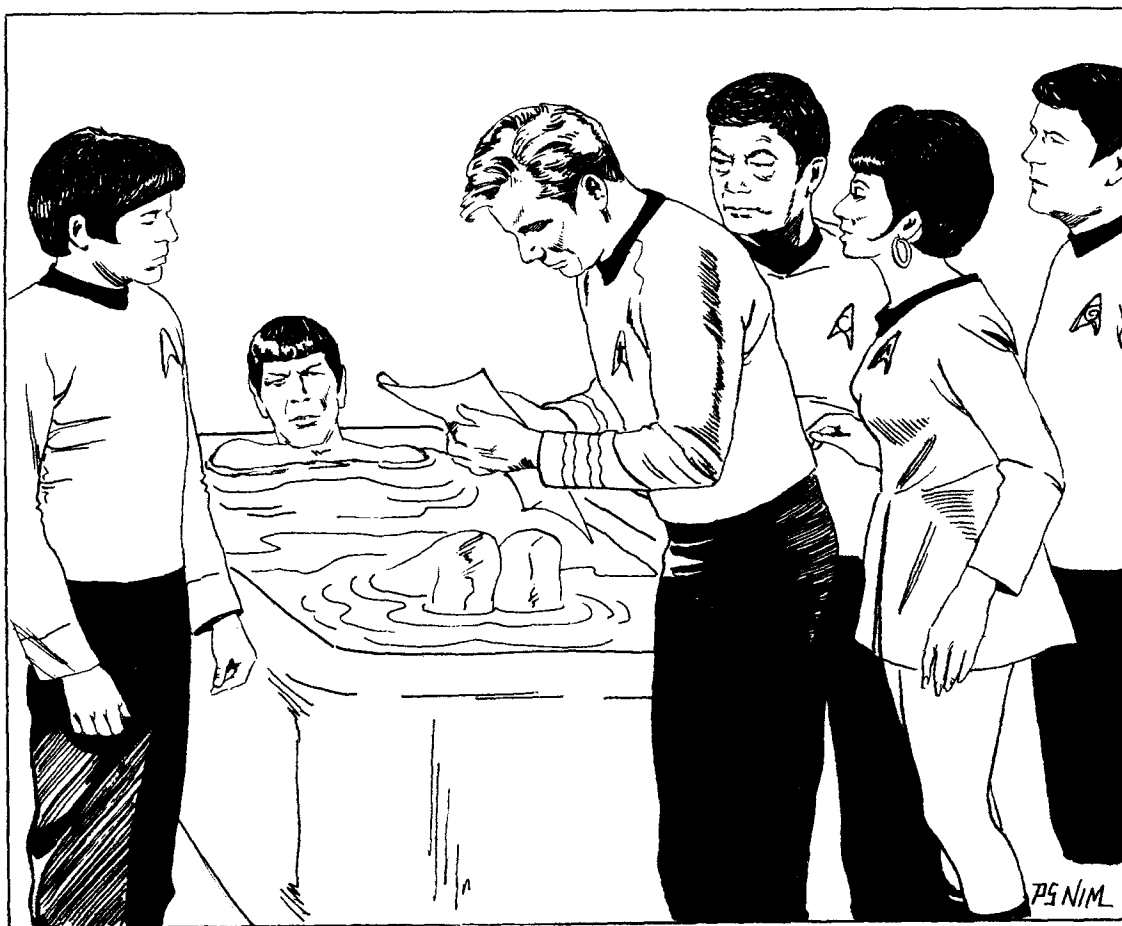
After her initial astonishment at seeing Spock sitting in a bathtub, Uhura was all business. "Captain, word just came in on the corpse. It seems he was one Chester Norton Lavender, a small-time trader and cargo dealer. He owned a small cruiser, the *SS Destry*, registry number ATT604. And--" She paused to catch her breath. "--he

tered around the tub trying to read over his shoulder.

Spock considered that perhaps his father had been right: he should never have joined Starfleet. Humans were indeed impossible to live with.

Kirk scanned the list rapidly. "Here it is. The *Destry*. We've got him. Find the *Destry* and I'll be willing to bet a week's pay that we'll find the murderer as well. Mr. Scott, Mr. Chekov, round up the posse and we'll head him off at the pass." Kirk herded them out the door, but at the last minute McCoy ducked back into the room.

"Spock, I will say this for you. You may be logical and unemotional, but you sure know how to



had a partner, Charles Henry Larson. The *Destry* has been working this quadrant for the last six solar months."

"Bullseye!" yelled McCoy. "I think--"

Once again he was interrupted by someone at the door. Chekov had come to bring Kirk the list of ships that had passed within range of the *Enterprise*.

Kirk pounced on the list, and the others clus-

throw a fun party."



Finding the *Destry* wasn't all that easy. Five hours later they were still looking.

The main burden of the search fell on the shoulders of navigation and helm. Sulu and Chekov took to the task with a certain amount of predatory glee.

Spock, who had returned to the bridge several hours before, had little to do. For a while, the lotion had been effective and he had had relief from the ever-present torment. But now the itch was returning. It had started in the vicinity of his navel and was radiating outward. Had he been human he would have cried in frustration, or perhaps started banging his head against the bulkhead -- but he wasn't, so he sat and suffered in silence and gave himself a good talking to. *It is not logical*, he said to himself. *If I can control my heart rate, stop wounds from bleeding, drive pain from my conscious mind, I should be able to control one little itch.* Yet, even as he reasoned this out, he'd unconsciously slipped his finger under the waistband of his pants and was scratching his stomach with gusto.

"Got him!" yelled Sulu.

"Get a tractor beam on him, Scotty," Kirk ordered.

"Tractor beam on, Captain."

"All right, let's go get some answers, Mr. Spock."

Spock, busily concentrating on his problem, did not hear his captain, but out of force of habit followed him to the turbolift. Once inside, he stepped back against the wall and tried to scratch his back surreptitiously. It didn't work. Kirk at once noticed Spock's fidgeting.

"Is something wrong, Spock?"

"No, Sir, just straightening my tunic."



The bridge of the *Destry* was cramped, crowded, and dusty. Its captain was a plump little man, balding, with blue eyes that danced and twinkled. Not what you might expect of a murderer. Kirk was beginning to doubt his reasoning but his doubts evaporated with Larson's first words. "Well, you caught me. Guess I was just too dumb. Should have known that it wouldn't work."

"Your partner, Chester Lavender?" Kirk prompted.

"Yeah. I figured that if I planted him on some out of the way corner of your ship, no one would notice him for a while."

"You planted him in my bed."

"Oh, dear me, I am so sorry. Rather nasty for you, I should imagine."

"Why didn't you just beam him into space wide dispersal?" This question came from Spock who seemed to be fascinated by the small computer aboard the *Destry*. He was scratching his stomach again.

"Oh, I couldn't do that." The little man fluttered. "Chet and me, we were partners for such a long time. I thought about it. But I just

couldn't do it. It didn't seem right, disrespectful, you know. See, my idea was that if you found him, you'd make sure he got a proper funeral and all that."

Kirk was frankly amazed. "Why did you kill him?"

"Well, I didn't set out to kill him. But I just couldn't take it anymore. He was getting old, a little you know." One pudgy finger tapped the bald dome. "He kept buying crazy things for us to sell. We're in business, and we gotta pick up things that there is a market for, but he kept buying things that nobody wanted. I was getting plenty mad. Well, yesterday morning I was checking the cargo and I find these crates that I'd never seen before. I opened them and what do you think that dummy had brought aboard this time?"

Kirk shook his head; he couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Green Orion dancing girls!"

"In a crate?"

"Not the real ones, Captain. Don't be silly." Larson giggled which set his flesh to rippling. "Little statuettes, plastic ones of green Orion slave girls with chronometers on the stomachs. Five hundred and twenty-four of them. Something inside of me snapped. I grabbed the closest statue and clobbered him one. I was only trying to knock some sense into his head. Poor Chet. He dropped like a rock."

"Yeah, I'll just bet he did," Kirk muttered reverently. "Do you still have the-uh-murder weapon?"

"Oh, yeah. Those girls aren't worth much, but I could probably get a little. Would you like to see them?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Of course, no trouble. Right this way, Captain. Oh, forgive my manners. Would you like some tea?"

Kirk started to follow him into the aft cabin. "Are you coming, Spock?"

"In a minute, Sir."

With Kirk out of the room, Spock began to scratch his chest vigorously; it felt marvelous.



"I've met some strange people in my days, but that old man takes the cake." Kirk and Spock were on their way to the officers' mess from sickbay where they'd deposited their prisoner with an astonished McCoy. "He's space happy. I hope I never get like that," Kirk continued.

It was late and the mess was deserted. Kirk punched the food processor. "I'm starving. How about you?"

"No, not really," Spock replied dispiritedly.

Kirk examined him curiously. "Hey, I got you another present."

Spock perked up a little. "What is it this time?"

"I took the liberty of putting it in your quarters."

"What is it, Jim?"

"A work of art. A statue of a green Orion slave girl with a clock in her belly button."

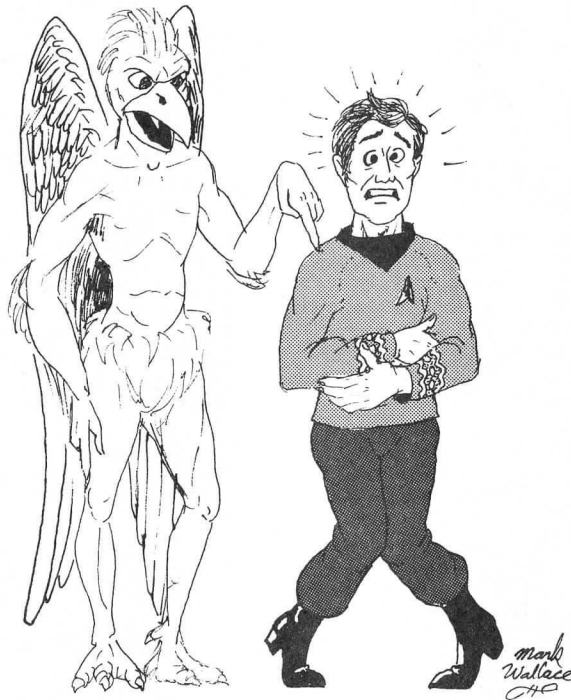
Spock smiled in spite of himself. "I believe the correct expression is 'just what I've always wanted'."

"I thought you'd like it. I got it at a real bargain."

They sat at their usual table and Kirk attacked his meal with enthusiasm. Spock pushed his food around on his plate with the back of his fork.

"Spock, something is wrong. What can I do to help?"

"Jim, would you please scratch my back?"



"Polly wants a cracker...NOW!"

# The BIG BANG Theory? →



# NEBULA



6992 Nebula Angela Varesano 13

More eternal than I  
And more ancient  
The depths of your beauty  
None can truly know.  
The stunning intricacy of your shining light  
Shatters the void  
Shatters the void.

More eternal than stars  
And more ancient  
Than the turning galaxy;  
O my soul,  
Of you are the veils of Cygnus  
And the pulsar's breath  
And the pulsar's breath.

Angela-marie Varesano

*From the Apollo Journals:*

As I write these words, I can scarcely believe two yarin have passed since Commander Adama's -- my father's -- death. Or even that six yarin have passed since we last saw home. Two sectars ago, Colonel Tigh insisted that I take my father's place as Commander. (I dislike the idea; I am not in favor of dynasties -- but the Council of Twelve, in a perverse mood, voted with Tigh.)

I must now take inventory. Six yarin have taken their toll on us. We have lost many ships and, more importantly, too many good people -- warrior and civilian alike. As equipment wears out, we have been constantly forced to cannibalize and improvise. But it cannot last forever.

Morale has stabilized, but it is far too low. In our search for Earth, we have followed too many false trails. Oh, my father, we must cease our search for your mystical planet, and settle for a world to call our home. Our people weary, and wish only to see a blue sky and green grass once more. I, too, weary. Where once I found reconnaissance missions thrilling and exhilarating, I now feel a profound despair. If I were a child, I would cry, "I want to go home," and I cannot accept that this battlestar must suffice.

A child. Boxey has spent more than half his life on this ship and can barely remember his home world. It will soon be time for him to take his life-name. And what of the children born during our flight, who have only a telescreen knowledge of fresh air and water. I fear they will forget why we are here, and be doomed to roam without end. Is that so bad? My heart cries, "Yes!" and my intellect must agree. Rambling without purpose is degenerate and ultimately fatal.

I must do something. Tomorrow we approach a new star system. And instead of being part of the reconnaissance team I must stay behind. Starbuck ... My friend, Starbuck, I pass my captaincy on to your shoulders. I have no words of wisdom for you; I ask only that you guard your life and act with dignity. I know that's hard for you. I have seen the haunted look in your eyes which disappears only when replaced by the sparkle of danger. We cannot lose you, and I must ask that you now act as befits a viper captain. I realize this is a collar around your neck, but is mine any less?

I record these words in my cabin that was Adama's. And in my mind's eye I see the fleet. And I know what I must do. If, by chance, my friends, we find an uninhabited but habitable planet in this star system, I shall go before the Council and suggest we colonize it. Did our ancestors just settle on their worlds, give up a goal? We shall never know. Neither shall we know Earth and our distant brethren -- if such a world exists. But in memory of a dream, if there is an uninhabited world in this system before us, I shall also ask the Council to so name it.

Commander Apollo  
GALACTICA



# SECOND DREAM

**Rich  
Kolker**

CHORUS: There's a second dream a'coming  
Ten long years of work have sown.  
Letter-writing time is over;  
The petition need has flown.  
Spaceborn symphony returning.  
Couldn't die; it just kept growing...

It was 1966 when it explodes across the screen:  
A beautiful white starship and the dawning of a dream;  
A shining light awakening that optimistic dawn;  
430 crew that traveled where no man had gone.

In the second year of magic, as we watched the dream expand,  
There were rumors of the banishment of Roddenberry's band.  
Like Vesuvius exploding, with a mad papyrus voice  
A million viewers telling NBC there was only one choice.

CHORUS:

Through disappointing tertiary season we did fly  
With the *Enterprise* across the Federation's crowded sky.  
But a second cry of outrage didn't faze the network brass,  
And it seemed that dream of optimistic future breathed its last.

But the folks out on the coast know not seeds that they had sown,  
And the fans of Roddenberry's dream set out upon their own:  
Fanzine editors, convention runners kept the dream alive  
In the hope the dawn of '66 would somehow yet survive.

CHORUS:

5, 10, 15, 20 thousand fans mass and scream  
"Give us back our starship, sir; our glowin', growin' dream.  
Give us film or television;  
No new cast, sir; no revision.  
Give us optimistic vision.  
Now, yes now,  
Don't slow the dream, don't hesitate;  
Don't spindle, fold or mutilate.  
Just give us *Star Trek*; we can't wait."  
And after ten long years they tell us that...

CHORUS.

CHORUS:

Handwritten musical notation for the Chorus section, measures 1-4. The music is in 4/4 time, treble clef, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The chords are: C (measure 1), Am (measure 2), A (measure 3), and Dm (measure 4). The notation includes a repeat sign at the end of measure 4.

Verse:

Handwritten musical notation for the Verse section, measures 5-12. The music is in 4/4 time, treble clef, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are: C4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The chords are: C (measure 5), Am (measure 6), F (measure 7), G (measure 8), Dm (measure 9), C (measure 10), Bm (measure 11), and C (measure 12). The notation includes a repeat sign at the end of measure 12.

I Wonder What  
the Vulcan  
is doing Tonight  
Beverley Clark

I wonder what the Vulcan is doing tonight?  
What agony is the Vulcan enduring tonight?  
The lights within his room have never burned so dim;  
I wonder what the devil is bothering him.

How go the final hours  
Till he sees the stony towers  
Rising anciently above while he's prepared?  
Well! I'll tell you what the Vulcan is feeling  
                tonight --  
He's scared. He's scared!

You mean that a man who braved a horta,  
Thought to her while she was fixed with mortar,  
Thinks of his bride with terror and distress?

YES!

An officer who's so calm in battle  
Even his captain doesn't rattle,  
Faces his future petrified with fright?

RIGHT!

You mean that appalling wail I hear,  
That sounds like a banshee sailing near,  
Is merely a song to make his feelings freeze?

PLEASE!

You wonder what the Vulcan is wishing tonight --  
To be in Engineering, fissioning, tonight.  
What occupies his mind while he sits there so  
                                forlorn?  
He's wondering in his soul why he was ever born!

And oh, the expectation,  
The relieved anticipation  
He must feel that soon salvation will have come!

Well!  
I'll tell you what the Vulcan is feeling tonight --  
He's numb!  
He brings  
His harp,  
He sings!  
And that's what the Vulcan's doing tonight.

"I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight?"  
Lerner and Loewe  
Camelot

# The Covenant

## LOIS WELLING

Commander Spock faced James Kirk across the desk in the captain's quarters. Kirk looked at the printout he was holding. "Well, Spock, for once things have worked out; your leave came through. The trip to Vulcan isn't exactly the shortest; you'll have several layovers. But in three weeks we'll be close enough to Vulcan to swing back and pick you up."

*Worked out, thought Spock. No, Captain, things have not worked out. All this has done is place me in the middle of a dilemma, faced with a decision I do not wish to make. He was torn between what he should do and what he wanted to do. He had experienced it before, almost twenty years ago when he had been forced to choose between Starfleet which he wanted, and the Vulcan Science Academy which was Sarek's choice.*

Jim Kirk looked up at his first officer. "Spock, are you listening to me?"

*"Certainly, Captain." He accepted his orders and knew his decision had been made. He remembered the ordeal with T'Pol. It's too soon, his mind cried. I need more time. I'm not ready to face Vulcan. The thought of having to deal with any female was almost enough to make him ill. But I will go to please Sarek. There will be no bonding. Who would mate their daughter to me? But perhaps communication between Sarek and myself will bring us together and end what is left of the animosity between us. Spock realized that accomplishing a reconciliation was important to him. He knew the twofold reason for Sarek's haste in finding him another mate. The aborted Pon Farr had left him in*

a very precarious condition. It could reappear at any time, and the sooner he was again bonded, the sooner the memories of what had happened would fade from everyone's mind.

---

Six days later, Spock emerged from the Vulcan space port, boarded a public transit car and rode it to the city limits. From there it was a twenty minute walk to the desert's edge, and his parents' home. He entered through the garden entrance and found a surprised Amanda staring up at him.

"Spock, why didn't you let us know your arrival time? We would have met you."

"Mother, I had no wish to interfere with your routine."

Sarek appeared at the back door. "Since when is meeting our son interference?"

Father and son faced each other. Spock noted the stiffness of his father's manner and all his hopes for the visit began to abandon him.

Sarek continued, "Had we known your exact arrival time, we could have arranged our schedule to be free this evening. As it is now, your mother and I are about to leave for an engagement we cannot reschedule at this late hour."

Before Spock could apologize, Amanda said, "Sarek, tomorrow we shall see what can be done

about some free time."

Sarek nodded, and it seemed to Spock that his father's voice softened. "I regret you will be spending your first evening at home alone." He helped Amanda with her cloak and they walked briskly toward the gate. He paused and turned back to Spock. "Son, I am gratified that you chose to come for this interview. You will find the portfolio on my desk."

Alone in the house, Spock went first to his room to unpack, sonic and change. Everything was just as it had been when he left for Starfleet Academy so many years before. It was a boy's room and no longer suited him, but he knew it pleased his mother to keep it this way.

He emerged from the room feeling refreshed, and decided to tour the house. He walked from room to room, remembering scenes from his boyhood. Many things looked the same, others very different, but it all seemed smaller somehow.

As he passed the door that led to an old part of the house that was closed off and had not been used for many years, he remembered himself as a frightened five-year-old, sent to fetch some item. He had told himself it was illogical to be afraid, yet he had scurried as fast as his thin legs would carry him.

He programmed himself a light supper and took it out to the garden. He sat in the warm evening breeze, not at all unhappy about being alone on his first evening home. He relaxed with his thoughts. There was no pressure to make conversation.

Midway through his meal, he saw the movement of his mother's pet lem on the garden wall. When I-Chaya had died, his parents had decided to get a pet that required less care than a sehlat. The lem was a good choice. Like an Earth cat which Amanda had owned as a child, it was independent and could be left on its own for weeks at a time. It had been taught to use a small iris opening in the wall and could be trusted to obtain only needed amounts of food by pushing a button with its paw.

As he sat gazing at the familiar sights around him, Spock knew that this place would always be home to him. He roamed space as first officer of the *Enterprise* and relished the challenge and excitement of his work, but when that was behind him, this would be where he would come to live out his life; this was home. If he had ever doubted it, he could no more. For never had it been shown to him more clearly than when the fever had come upon him, fiercely compelling him to return to the planet of his birth.

His thoughts led him to the portfolio on Sarek's desk. He knew he should go and deal with it, but he remained where he was. The lem, which had been stalking and appraising him from a distance, suddenly pounced onto his lap, demanding attention. As he sat there stroking the animal, his mind began to re-live the events that were the cause of his dark mood. It had been a fiasco from the very beginning. Mentally, he counted his mistakes. *First you ignored the early signs that the Pon Farr was imminent, even though you knew what to*

*expect. McCoy is correct: you do not see that which you do not wish to see. Then you had the effrontery to believe that you could maintain control when no other Vulcan male could. Somehow you would be different. But you weren't different. The control went and there was that disgusting behavior in front of the crew. You actually disobeyed orders. What irony that the understanding of humans saved you from the official reprimand you deserved. You caused Jim to risk his career for you. Doctor McCoy feels a great responsibility for your life. They stood by you even when you wouldn't explain your behavior. They took you to Vulcan. Vulcan...He gazed past the garden wall at the starlit horizon.*

With such clarity it came back to him -- T'Pring's unspeakable actions. She had planned all along to challenge, to say she would rather be chattel to any man than wife to the half-breed Spock. It was the ultimate insult. *But to choose Jim...* The pain that always clutched at his chest when he recalled the incident did so again. As the memories flooded his mind, he let the pain remain, like some kind of penance for that deed. He knew that instinct had led, that he had had no control - *"I will do what I must do"* - but that was no excuse for the act of taking a life, a special life, that of his captain and his friend; and when the deed was done, he had had no fever, no interest in T'Pring, no interest in life itself.

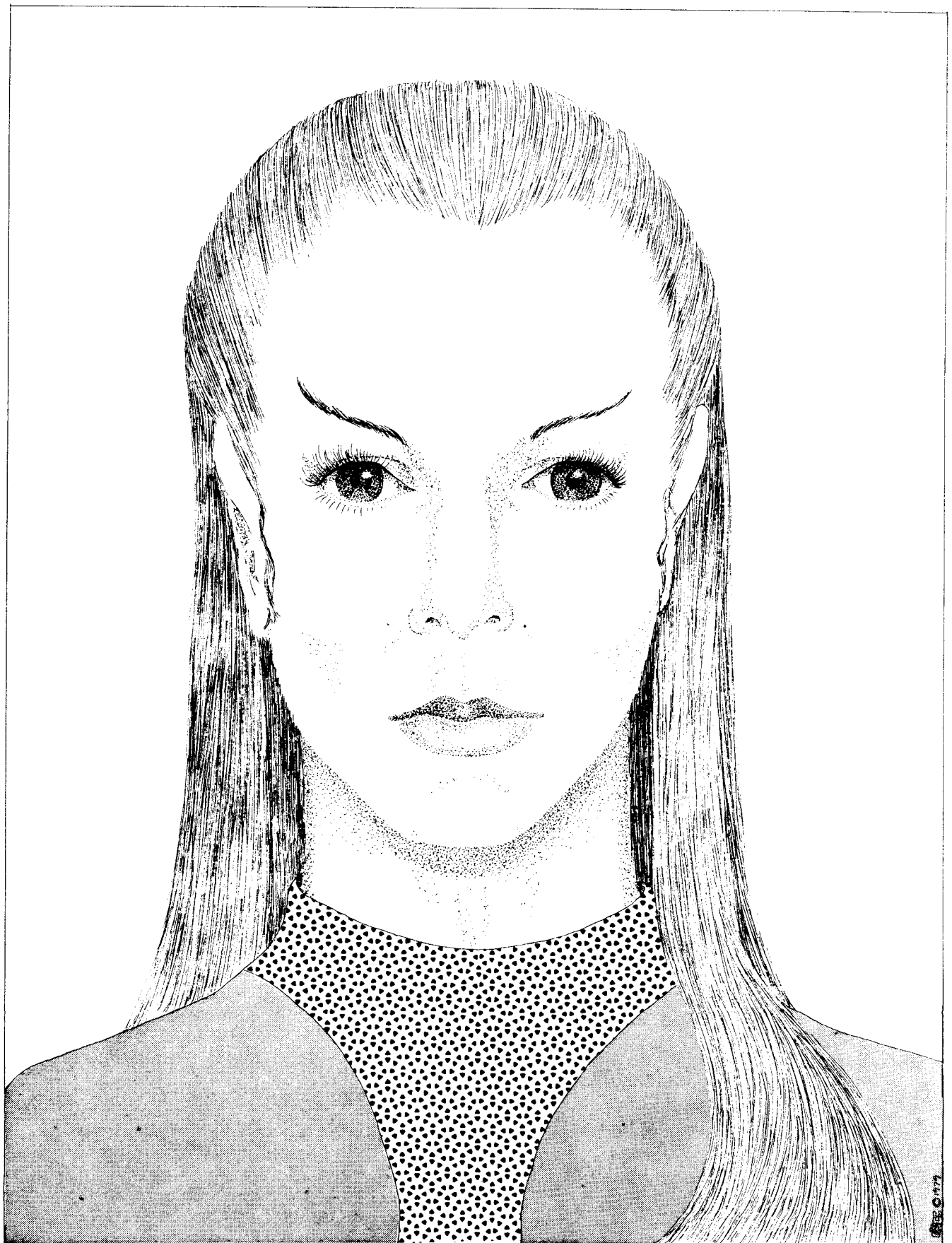
Back on the ship he had been preparing to surrender to authorities, but there was Jim - alive - thanks to McCoy's quick thinking. Spock had been so relieved -- another disgraceful display of emotion. He had realized later what a boomerang effect seeing Jim alive had had on him. He had not taken a life, had not killed Jim. Depression had set in as other aspects of the incident sifted into his mind. The looks from some crewmembers...what must they think? And when he considered what must be happening on Vulcan - challenge was a rare thing.

Jim had always been there trying in his quiet way to show friendship. The doctor was more vocal in his concern. It hadn't really helped. What Spock needed was more time. Yet here he was, about to face the preliminaries of another bonding. It was enough to make him consider the merits of the lingering death.

The stretching lem intruded on his thoughts, and he realized the lateness of the hour. Knowing his mother would arrive home tired but would feel compelled to spend time with him, he decided to retire for the evening.

---

The next day, Spock excused himself from breakfast and went to the study to attend to the portfolio. Engaging the computer, the first thing he saw on the screen was the likeness of a young woman. She was very fair. Her hair was light brown with auburn highlights, and her eyes a medium green. He was relieved she was so different from T'Pring. Spock ignored the printout containing her credentials since Sarek would have already checked them most thoroughly and Spock only needed



enough information to make intelligent conversation at the interview, but curiosity motivated him to check her height - 165 centimeters - and her age. She was just past 25 turnings. Her name was T'Ayrian, the younger of two daughters of T'Salma and Sigeer. He recognized the family name immediately. Msfrpzfnf. They had been engaged in commerce for several generations.

Spock turned off the viewer and sat back in his chair. *What a waste of time this is.* With her family's wealth and connections, she would have suitors from all over the planet. Although Vulcan custom stated that all should be equal, facts could not be ignored. On Vulcan the male needed to mate to live. The female did not. This gave her the advantage. While parents made the choice for their children, adults were allowed more freedom. But T'Ayrian's bondmate had been killed before the marriage. This put her between child and adult. How much choice would she be allowed in the selection of a mate? *Does it matter?* he asked himself. *A prestigious family with an intelligent, attractive, virgin female would see no advantage in mating her with an older mixed-breed, employed in Starfleet, who doesn't even live on Vulcan, and has had an unsuccessful bonding.* Spock knew his chances were nil. What he couldn't understand was why his father had even bothered to ask him home for this.

Spock returned to the viewer. T'Ayrian was a hydro-engineer, working at a new plant just outside the city. He studied the psychological tests and noted that their compatibility correlations were extremely high. But families did not choose mates based on that factor alone.

It was time to change for the meeting. At least, he told himself, *it will soon be over.*

Spock found the building he wanted and took the lift to the third floor. The family's city apartment was the first on the left. He touched the signalplate and waited. Thirty seconds later the door opened and he faced her.

T'Ayrian spoke first. "Enter Spock; be welcome in this dwelling."

He gave the proper reply. "May my presence complement the harmony of this home."

She followed with another tradition. "Hast thee thirst from thy journey?"

"No. I am sustained."

"Then if thee would follow me." He walked behind her into the formal sitting room, glancing at the decor, a collection of art objects from many places in the galaxy. He was impressed. The family obviously found that business was not the only worthwhile aspect of other cultures.

When they were seated, T'Ayrian said, "I trust your journey was not too tiresome."

"Somewhat, yes. I had to transfer three dif-

ferent times with lengthy layovers. Have you travelled off Vulcan?"

"I have been allowed to accompany my father on several different occasions, and I did find it most interesting. But my parents would not allow too many trips because of my schooling."

Her behavior was proper, the conversation stilted and forced. But behind that, he sensed her very close study of him.

"I have not seen that type of Starfleet uniform before. Is it new?"

"No. It is the 'dress' uniform, worn on formal occasions."

"I am honored. And the decorations, are they your awards of merit?"

"Yes." Finding this topic uncomfortable, he tried to change the subject. "I beg pardon for not being in Vulcan dress, but I discovered on my return that my civilian wardrobe is rather limited."

"Do not apologize, Commander. I find the uniform most interesting." She began to inquire about Starfleet in general and his position in particular.

After almost an hour, she said, "I have prepared a meal for us." She stood and led the way to a small garden balcony. "I believe thee will find it pleasant here."

She excused herself and Spock took the opportunity to let his mind examine what was happening. He was confused. He had predicted a short meeting with the whole family in which they would live up to the formalities of the situation and excuse him at the first possible opportunity. But to find her alone and apparently in no hurry to dismiss him... Her return with a tray of food put a temporary halt to his thoughts.

To cover the silence, he said, "Your parents will not be joining us?"

"No, Spock. They are not at home. I realize that this is somewhat irregular, but I asked that we not be disturbed." Noting his raised eyebrow, she added, "These occasions can be most awkward for the two principles; extra individuals only increase uneasiness. Does it trouble you?"

"No. I agree with your reasoning." The answer was not quite true.

As if she sensed that, she said, "Spock, I would assume that thee had read the portfolio, as I have." He nodded. "I wish to know that individual to whom those facts pertain. That can best be accomplished without others present."

He reflected on her comments during the silence of the meal. He had to admit that he was unnerved. He had prepared himself to deal primarily with her parents and only secondarily with her. This was irregular. Watching her, he noted that she seemed very at ease with the situation. It was surprisingly pleasant. A new thought came to him: *how many times has she met a prospective mate...and*

*how can she gain by this?*

As he helped her clear the table, he asked, "How is it that you have so little difficulty dealing with this situation?"

"I accept it."

"Thee does not feel like - a commodity?"

"No. It is a fact that the males of our race must have a mate. Coupled with the telepathy, compatibility is extremely important. The bonding is logical. While the Vulcan way may not be the best, it does provide a suitable mate. I remember my amazement upon learning in school that ours was not the only, or even the most common way." Spock remembered his own dismay.

With the air cleared somewhat, the talk flowed a little easier. Spock asked about her work.

"We have a new facility that is quite impressive. Hast thee seen it?"

"No. I only arrived yesterday."

She began to describe the plant and the new process used, and within seconds they were immersed in a conversation comparing the merits of different types of water treatment. As the afternoon wore on, neither seemed aware of the sun's position in the summer sky. When they realized the hour, Spock prepared to take his leave. But T'Ayrian's mother arrived, and before the introductions were complete her father came home. T'Salma suggested refreshments and Spock felt that he could not refuse.

On his way home, Spock had to conclude that she was a many-faceted female. *Whoever is mated with her will never be bored.*

---

Spock arrived home in time for the evening meal and found his mother in the kitchen.

"Spock, you were gone so long, I was becoming concerned. Did it go well?"

"Mother, can one ever tell?"

"I guess I don't know. Your father's and my meeting was so very different."

They studied each other and emotion was very close to the surface.

"Excuse me, Mother. I shall change before dinner."

He had always wondered about that meeting and had tried many times, without success, to imagine how they had ever become well enough acquainted to discuss marriage. He loved and respected his mother. He knew that life on Vulcan had not been easy for her, but she had made the transition from human to Vulcan. She had become the mate Sarek wanted and needed. There was no doubt of the love and harmony between them, but it had not always been so. While growing up, Spock had been periph-

erally aware that there were problems, mostly to do with his upbringing. It had been his mother's ability to adapt that was responsible for the melding his parents now shared. Sarek had been patient, even understanding at times, but it was Amanda who changed. He knew his mother's version of that meeting, told through the eyes of a romantic twenty-year-old female. But what had Sarek felt and thought? Spock knew he would never have the answers to those questions.

During the meal, Spock tried to prepare answers to the questions he knew his father would ask later. After rethinking the afternoon, he still had no answers.

The small family moved from the dining room to the garden and Spock braced himself. He was not prepared to hear..."Spock, the captain and the doctor, things are well with them?"

"Yes, Father. Everything is fine." Not trusting his good luck to last, he quickly asked, "The Babel proclamations, are you satisfied with the way they are being administered?"

"On the whole, yes. We took great care to see that a competent individual was placed in charge."

"I read that there was much opposition to Kimmel's having that position."

"They were convinced of the logic of it."

*He's not going to ask, Spock finally realized. He must feel that I've done my part and now it's out of my hands.*

The talk became easier and the tension seemed to melt away. Spock was aware of Amanda's pleasure at seeing father and son together; and it was also obvious to him that Sarek wanted the rift between them healed as much as he did.

"I had planned to spend a few days in the desert," Spock announced. "Father, I do not suppose it would be possible for you to join me?" he added tentatively.

"No, my son, I have duties I cannot postpone. If I had but known..." There was a pause. Sarek was obviously evaluating what he would say. "Perhaps some arrangements can be made."

They consulted the map on the study wall and made plans. Spock would leave in the morning and spend three days traveling to Surak's Retreat. Sarek would join him there and they would have two days together.

---

The next morning, Spock hoisted the pack to his back and began walking, letting the heat soak into his body. He needed this quiet time alone. Things on the *Enterprise* were either hectic as hell - as Bones would say - or deadly routine boring, no in-between. It was good to be away from it for a time. He forced all thoughts of problems concerning the ship from his mind. They were routine and would be waiting on his return. And since the



problem of T'Ayrian was out of his hands until she made a decision, he had put that aside as well. He walked, and with each step he recalled the historical significance of what had happened there in the desert, and what it meant to his people. During the evening of the third day, he rounded the dune to find Sarek setting up camp.

Spock pitched in and they shared the chores of their meal, then spent the evening in silence. Spock could see that his father was attempting to relax in preparation for the next day's hike.

In the following days the two men, alone with each other and away from the pressures of duties, began recalling the many days they had spent in the desert when Spock was young, training for the Kahswan. First, at age five, the child was taken to the desert and little by little given more difficult tasks to perform. Then his first trip alone at age six was just for the day; he must return before nightfall. Spock had felt that Sarek would never have enough confidence in him to allow an overnight outing. Finally, on his seventh birthday, the day had come and as Spock lay in his bed roll, marking his first night in the desert *alone* and away from home, he had been grateful for his father's precautions. He would never forget the look of relief on Amanda's face, or the one of pride in Sarek's eyes as he entered the garden the next morning to find them waiting.

On their last night in the desert, as they sat by the fire, Spock decided to ask the question uppermost in his mind. "Father, why did you summon me home for this interview? There is no real chance that T'Ayrian's family will approve of me as a mate for her."

"Spock, if you read the psychological tests, you know the match would be good."

"Father, you avoid the obvious."

"I do not. I did discuss the subject with Sigeer. All he said was that T'Ayrian requested it."

"Spock, this incident has given me a new insight into the problems your heritage has been for you, something I regret not having realized when you were growing up."

Spock had much to ponder for the rest of the evening.

---

As they approached the last rise in the terrain, revealing the house just a quarter-kilometer in the distance, Spock admitted to himself that he did not want this trip to end.

They arrived home to find Amanda, somewhat flushed, waiting at the garden gate. "Where have you two been? You were due home this morning."

"Is there some problem?" Sarek asked.

"Problem? No. I don't think we should call this a problem."

Both men stared at her.

"T'Ayrian's father called. We are to be at their home in less than an hour. Hurry and get ready, both of you."

Spock was puzzled. His mother was all but pushing him up the walk. "Why should they want to see us?"

Sarek looked from his son to his wife. "He acquired *that* from your side of the family."

Amanda smiled. "Spock, there is only one reason they would want to see us."

Sarek looked at his son. "Spock, if you do not wish this, now is the time to speak."

Spock was awed. His father had actually asked him.

Sarek continued. "We chose for you last time, with poor results. This time the decision must be yours. Do you wish this?"

He was at a loss for an answer. *Do I wish it?* He hadn't really thought about it; he hadn't thought there was any chance it would come to this. He had only done it to please his father. Now it seemed that for some reason T'Ayrian's family, or T'Ayrian herself, had chosen him. The thought hit him: *She knows, and it does not matter.* To his so recently wounded ego, that went far in her favor. He pushed aside the nagging thoughts that kept asking 'Why? Why had she chosen him?' He would eventually need a mate. With customs as they were on Vulcan, and marriage based on computer-decided compatibility - the real test being Pon Farr - did he have the right to refuse? Good matches were difficult to find...

"Father, I wish it."

"Very well. Let us try not to be late."

---

They arrived in time and were ushered into the sitting room. T'Ayrian was there with her parents. They performed the standard greetings, then after several seconds of strained silence Sigeer cleared his throat and spoke.

"My daughter has a somewhat unusual request. It is our understanding that Spock will be rejoining his ship in nine days. Is that correct?"

Spock nodded.

"T'Ayrian wishes for a bonding and marriage to take place before Spock leaves Vulcan."

Silence. Amanda recovered her voice first. "May we ask why?"

T'Ayrian rose from her chair. "Children are bonded so they may become acquainted and then they will have certain knowledge of each other when - it is needed. Not only have Spock and I not had that time, but I believe that such knowledge alone is

not adequate to build a solid marriage. Spock and I, even bonded, would be strangers. As a married couple, we would be allowed more intimacies and more freedom to become acquainted. I believe this to be a much better preparation for - 'the time'. If I may be so bold as to say so, I do not wish to go to my marriage bed with a stranger."

Sarek studied her. "This is new - radical - thinking, but there is much to be said for it. Many a marriage with such an unfortunate beginning has taken years to recover." He turned to his son. "Spock, do you have any objections?"

He could think of none. He couldn't remember later if he had agreed verbally or by shaking his head, but he did remember the nagging thought *What is she after?* It wasn't that this arrangement was unheard of. Among the less wealthy there were oftentimes problems, financial, housing, child care, occupational, that made it feasible for a couple to marry before the next Pon Farr. But none of those reasons applied here.

The remainder of the evening was spent by the parents in planning the event. T'Ayrian said she preferred the traditional ceremony for such an occasion. Spock was amused; she wanted to combine an unorthodox act with an ancient traditional ceremony.

"Spock has no formal clothes for such a ceremony," Amanda exclaimed. "Can the tailor prepare something on such short notice?"

"The first time I saw the commander, he was wearing his Starfleet dress uniform," T'Ayrian replied. "I found the sight most impressive. If there are no rules against it, could he not wear that?"

It was decided and the planning continued. The usual place for a bonding and marriage outside of Pon Farr was still the male's family lands. T'Ayrian interrupted the discussion.

"I am given to believe that the garden adjoining Spock's home is quite attractive and peaceful. If you think it proper, might we hold the ceremony there?"

There being no objections, it was approved. Spock was secretly pleased that news of his mother's beautiful garden had traveled, and felt relief at not having to face the desert place so soon.

Since T'Pau was a colleague of Sarek's, Spock assumed she would again be asked to officiate. He had no desire to face her. Suddenly he realized that the individual being considered was not T'Pau but someone named T'Mal, who was related to T'Salma.

When the parents were again absorbed in conversation, T'Ayrian asked Spock if he would help her prepare refreshments. He followed her into the kitchen.

"You seem unusually quiet this evening, Spock. Do you find the plans unsuitable?"

He studied her for several seconds and then said, "I have no objections."

"Then I have another request. Would you see fit to ask Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy to attend the ceremony?"

He stared at her in disbelief. She knew the facts. That was her right. But to do *this*.

"Spock, if I cause offense, I ask forgiveness, but I wish that your friends might have the opportunity to observe how civilized Vulcans behave. Will you consider it?" She picked up the tray and left the room.

The evening slowly drew to a close and it was agreed to continue making arrangements the next day at Sarek and Amanda's home, where T'Ayrian and her family could see the garden and finalize plans.

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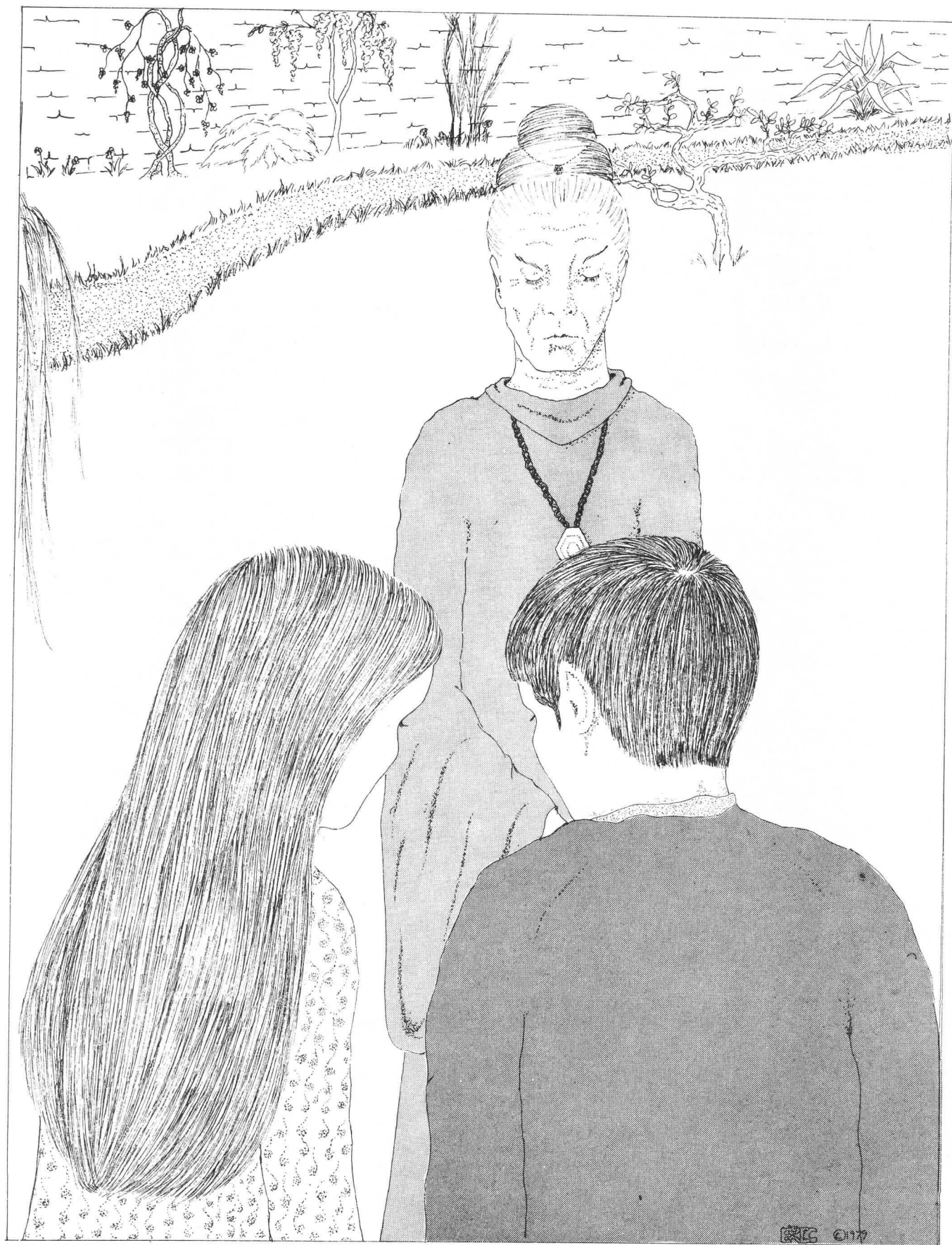
The next eight days were a whirlwind of activities and arrangements. Between her work and wedding plans, T'Ayrian's time was fully occupied. Spock spent his days with Sarek at the Academy. He had been surprised at the invitation to visit the new research project, and when Sarek asked his advice and then his help, he had been flattered and moved.

The only time the young couple spent together was in the evenings, making plans with their parents. There was little time for private conversation, but Spock was not sure he could have found anything of a personal nature to discuss anyway. The same doubts were still swirling in the back of his mind.

He faded into the background and watched. He was aware of the activities. He carefully studied both sets of parents. But, most of all, he observed T'Ayrian. She was apparently open, unguarded. *As if the world is hers*, he thought. *Why shouldn't that be so? The world has been kind to her.* He contrasted his childhood experiences with what he knew of hers. Being full Vulcan, she would not have had to prove herself as he had: she had acceptance. Both did have one tragedy in their lives, but how different these two incidents were. One had been an accidental death, leaving T'Ayrian alone, grieving, yet untouched; the other was conspiracy, betrayal, leaving him cast out, branded. She was unscarred mentally, physically. *How will she feel when that is no longer so? She says she accepts what is, but that is the voice of inexperience.*

---

When the ceremony was four days away, Spock kept an appointment with T'Mal. It was one of the formalities for the bonding of adults. To insure, as much as possible, that the two individuals were freely joining for the purpose of serving tradition, each other, and eventually, children; for the bonding to solidify during the Pon Farr, both parties had to be positive in their attitude.



T'Mal was not pleased. "Spock, I must insist on another meeting. As your state of mind is now, I cannot in good conscience conduct this marriage."

Spock was stunned; he tried to defend himself, but her voice stopped him. "Do not speak now. Thy history is known to me, Spock. I can understand the reasons for the conflict within you. You want to believe, but feel only betrayal. Under the circumstances it could hardly be otherwise. But to enter a union without full commitment would be disastrous. Most outstanding in you is mistrust. In that area I can reassure you. Upon learning of your experience, I questioned T'Ayrian severely as to her intent. I thought that perhaps some misguided sense of duty or sympathy might have motivated her. That is not so. She is committed to this union.

"Until we meet again, Spock, think on these matters."

Spock had done that, long into the night. It had been a relief to hear that T'Mal was more than satisfied with T'Ayrian's motives. *She should know; she deals with these matters as part of her life's work.* He needed to know that there was no pity in T'Ayrian's motives; he could not have lived with that.

Spock knew that commitment to the union was critical if the bonding and marriage were to succeed. Vulcans were fiercely individualistic, more so than most other races knew. One reason for the bonding of children was to instill in the individual a sense of the other, of togetherness that would, hopefully, develop after the marriage. Yet while T'Mal might choose not to conduct the ceremony, she could not legally prevent it.

*But she is right. I do want to believe. I want a wife, a Vulcan wife, and some day, children. I cannot hope to find a better choice than T'Ayrian. But to risk...That is the key: risk. Life gives no guarantees, Spock, and you have always been willing to risk.*

At his second meeting with T'Mal, he fared much better.

---

Nineteen days after Spock had begun his leave, his communicator beeped, and he knew the *Enterprise* was in orbit around Vulcan. Within a few seconds, he was speaking with the captain.

"Well, Mr. Spock, did you have a pleasant leave?"

"Yes, Captain, very much so." He paused. "Jim, I should like to request permission to conduct a class three tour of the ship for an acquaintance of mine."

Kirk granted the permission and gave instructions to the transporter room.

---

For the two hours that Spock and T'Ayrian toured the ship, all eyes were on them. The last stop of the tour was the bridge. Spock had planned it that way. He introduced T'Ayrian to the crew and lastly to the captain.

"Mr. Spock, since it's almost lunchtime, would you and the lady be my guests?"

Spock looked at T'Ayrian and when she nodded, he accepted for them. When they were in the lift, he asked, "Captain, do you think it would be possible for the doctor to join us?"

"I think he'd like that, Spock." Kirk called sickbay.

The foursome had a pleasant lunch with very general conversation, making sure that nothing of a personal nature was mentioned. Spock could sense their curiosity and knew that he must tell them that on the next day this woman would become his bondmate and wife. But he couldn't find the right words. Finally he said, "Captain, Doctor, there is some news I would like to share with you. Tomorrow, T'Ayrian and I are to be married."

Both men sputtered their surprise and congratulations.

Spock knew enough about humans in general, and these two men in particular, to know that the best way to handle their next request was to 'play it light'. When things settled down, he added, "We would be honored if you would see fit to join us. Jim, I think you will find this time less strenuous; and Doctor, I do not believe you will have need of your medical kit."

Both men smiled. Nothing could keep them away.

---

The day of the wedding was hectic. The morning was spent getting things set up for the ceremony and instructing the hired help brought in for the day. One hour before noon, parents and son were dressed and began receiving guests. Spock felt he must have answered and asked the same few questions at least two dozen times. After T'Ayrian and her family arrived, Kirk and McCoy beamed down.

Soon it was time. T'Mal took her place. The room was quiet as the couple moved to their positions in front of her and the guests came to attention. The bonding ceremony was the same for children and adults, except that when Spock had been seven years old and bonded to T'Pring, his parents had been standing behind him and he had been able to sense their moral support. Now he stood alone, as did T'Ayrian, a sign that they were consenting adults and were making this commitment of their own free will.

T'Mal motioned for the two to approach her. They knelt in front of her and she placed her hand on Spock's temple. He sensed T'Mal enter his mind. She repeated the process with T'Ayrian. Their minds were now joined to hers. With a sureness of her years of training, she began to focus their

minds onto each other and away from hers. Both felt the joining, but the sense of being bombarded with the whole of another's consciousness tended to blur individual thoughts. The result was a mixture of vague perceptions. Neither had the inclination to go deeper. T'Mal was trained to keep her own mind exiled from this meld. She was simply the focal point. The ritual words were spoken, the idea planted, to grow and be called to the surface when 'the time' was upon them. When the meld met with her satisfaction, T'Mal withdrew from it; the bonding was completed.

Societies tailor their ceremonies to their own particular needs. For that reason, the Vulcan marriage ceremony was among the shortest and simplest in the known galaxy. Since the bonding and all it implied, conducted when minds were in control, preceded it, either by many years or, as in this case, by just a few minutes, the final ceremony did not need to be long or complicated.

The bell ringers began the systematic movements that created a solemn mood. Spock approached the gong, a smaller version of the one that had stood in the desert. He took the mallet from its hanging place, and raised it, signifying his intent. At this point, the female could stop him, if this were her desire. As he raised the mallet, the fear that T'Ayrian might do so fleetingly crossed his mind.

The low tone of the gong vibrated in the garden. It was done. Spock and T'Ayrian faced each other. He stretched his hand to her, and as she started toward him he moved to meet her halfway. It was a subtle gesture, and to all but the humans present it had much significance: this would be a mating of two equals.

With their fingers entwined, they turned to receive the blessing of family friends. The two families, now joined, shared water and food, the gesture a remnant of ancient times when the marriage of two members of warring tribes was used to bring an end to the hostilities.

It was time for the *Enterprise* to leave orbit. Spock gave Jim and McCoy his gear when they departed, then began his farewells. Before it had been just his parents, but now he had a wife and her whole family, and the goodbyes would take longer. He started with T'Ayrian's sister -- no, he must remember that she was his marriage sister now -- and her family. T'Vanda's husband and son were gracious and wished him well. The boy reminded Spock that he had promised him a tour of the *Enterprise* on the first possible occasion. He approached T'Vanda, and she too wished him well. "Spock, I am most pleased to call you brother. Take care, and come back to us." He nodded, and succeeding in not showing his discomfort.

He inwardly braced himself to deal with her parents. They echoed the same message of care and concern, only changing the brother to son. He was about to escape when Sigeer took him aside.

"Spock, I understand there is a human custom

of gift-giving on such occasions. I should like to honor that custom in your mother's name by presenting you with this card. It will allow you passage on any ship in our family fleet, or any contracted to us. I hope you may find it helpful at some time."

Spock wasn't sure what to think, but he thanked Sigeer for the gift. He was most relaxed saying goodbye to his parents.

"Take care, my son, and return soon. Also, if you would put your thoughts on our last discussion on the project in a letter, it would be appreciated."

"Of course, Father, at the first opportunity."

Feeling what he later decided was 'light-headed' from the events of the day, he embraced Amanda. He knew it would convey what he felt for her more accurately than mere words.

He had waited to speak with T'Ayrian until last, as was proper. They went into Sarek's study to be alone.

"Spock, I wish there were more time..."

"T'Ayrian, you knew..."

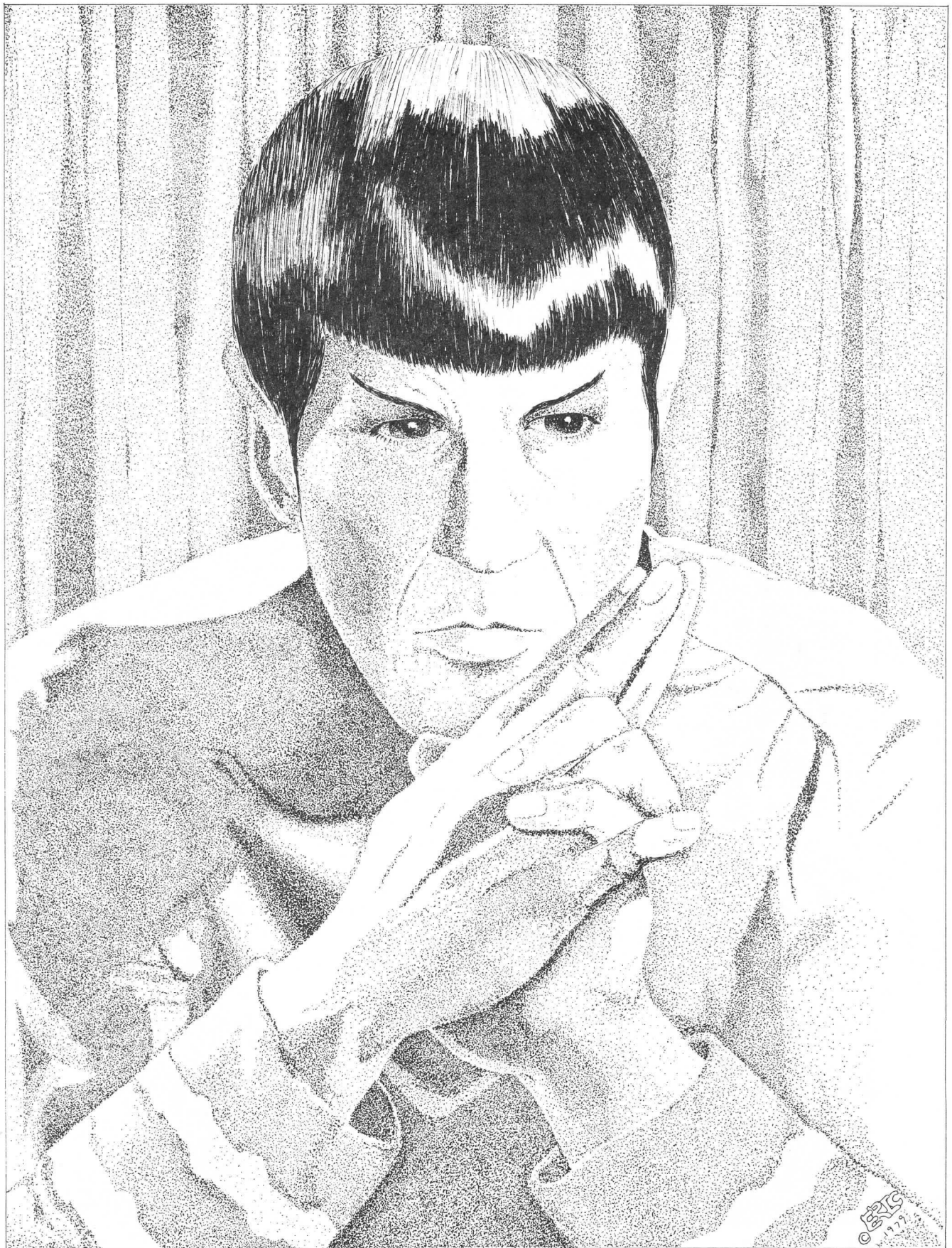
"Yes, I know. But when the time is at hand, it is always more difficult. She held out two fingers. As they touched, she said, "I await your return."

Life on the *Enterprise* fell back into the familiar routine. With one large difference: now Spock had four times the correspondence. His mother wrote more often. He and Sarek were conferring on that research project. T'Ayrian's parents wrote, her sister wrote, his nephew wrote, and T'Ayrian wrote. At one point he considered sending duplicate correspondence.

Away from Vulcan and from T'Ayrian, the doubts that had left him those last few days before the ceremony began to resurface. He had believed his misgivings to be behind him, but he found them again seeping into his thoughts. Rather than helping, her correspondence only added to his uneasiness. *She's trying too hard*, he decided.

Her letters stated that she wished him there, that being married and having him so far away was proving to be more difficult than she had anticipated. *Why didn't she choose a mate who'd remain on Vulcan?* he asked himself. She also said that without him there was a large void in her life. He wanted to believe her, but....Mild depression set in.

His questions were answered in the form of a postscript to another letter, innocently phrased: *I have taken separate lodging.* Spock was amazed at his own stupidity for not having figured it out for



himself.

*She wants freedom. As a married woman, she is no longer under her father's jurisdiction, and with an absentee husband she is for all practical purposes a free agent. A space officer is in a high-risk occupation; perhaps she even wants me to be killed - preferably before the next Pon Farr. That would leave her a widow with more than adequate finances. Then she will owe allegiance to no one, unless she so chooses. He decided he had been caught up in the tide of events, believing what he wanted to believe.*

Ensuing letters were filled with T'Ayrian's moving and decorating plans. She described her apartment in great detail, and asked his opinions on several matters. She expressed a desire that he should be pleased with the dwelling.

He believed none of it. Knowing he had little recourse, he waited to see how she would use this new freedom.

As the correspondence continued and their contents didn't change, Spock became more apprehensive. The phrase once heard and not understood came back to haunt him: "Like waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Letters continued to arrive. From her parents - T'Ayrian spent the weekend with us; from his parents - T'Ayrian had us over and we were impressed with the new apartment. She is making many of the furnishings herself; from her sister - T'Ayrian will be visiting us on holiday. Except for the decorating, Spock could not see where she was doing anything that she couldn't have done in her parents' home. He could not puzzle it out.

When the other shoe did drop, it was not anything Spock had expected. T'Ayrian had applied to and been accepted by Starfleet. Along with a copy of the application and acceptance, there was a letter:

*I beg pardon for not discussing this matter with you beforehand. I thought my chances of being accepted, and of being allowed to serve with you, not very high. Hydro engineers are not that necessary on a starship.*

Spock, I fear I have mishandled the whole matter, but of late your correspondence has been sparse and the contents most impersonal. It was my thought that this long distance marriage was not working very well. But if you feel that my presence on your ship would not be in the best interest of your career, you have only to state that. I shall understand.

What shall I do? Why do I feel defensive? Spock re-read her letter carefully, studying every nuance. I should not have agreed to this marriage. Trust must be built and allowed to grow as two individuals come to know and care for each other. I am married to a stranger and she is almost half a galaxy away.

T'Ayrian's letter lay on Spock's desk for almost a week. He thought about discussing his problem with Jim, but decided that that would require an explanation of cultural differences.

Finally he sat to the task. In good conscience, he had no concrete reason to disapprove if this was what she wanted. His return letter was formal, but accepting of her choice.

Spock threw himself deeper into his duties and gave very little thought to his personal life. Except when her letters came.

*I am finding the training a challenge, mostly because of the cultural differences. I have only dealt with humans before on a social level. Now I am living with humans, being taught by them, and preparing to enter a career in an organization that is human dominated. She asked his advice on several incidents.*

T'Ayrian had a knack for catching Spock off-guard. And she did it again when she wrote, Spock, I find myself with yet another problem. Except for a few language misunderstandings, I have had very little trouble getting along with the humans. As you know, the engineering department is predominately male, and because of the intensity of this training, we are spending much time together. All are most friendly to me -- Spock could bet they were -- and I try to return this friendship, although I find that the continual closeness can become a strain.

My problem concerns individual males. At one point they are part of the group, and then they suddenly approach me singly and ask if we might see each other alone. It is then I must tell them that I have no wish to do so and am, in fact, not free to do so. It is most awkward.

I have learned of the human custom of 'wedding rings' and think that for their culture it shows good reasoning. With so many of the people free and searching for mates, it seems a logical idea. It makes a very important statement without words, which in itself is unusual for humans.

Do you think it would be possible for me to have such a ring?

The time had come. Spock could no longer deal with his uncertainties. He requested a day's leave from his duties, and meditated. He went back over his bonding and marriage, incident by incident. There is nothing in her behavior I can find fault with. It is how I perceive things, he realized, and my perceptions are being colored by my aborted marriage with T'Pring. But T'Ayrian is not T'Pring. I must be fair and judge T'Ayrian's actions on their own merit.

I consented to this marriage, as did she. T'Ayrian is living up to her commitment. Can I do any less? No!

He would put away these questions and doubts,

and begin a new positive attitude in this marriage. He knew his letters had been lacking; he would do better. But something more dramatic was needed. He wrote T'Ayrian that he was considering her request for a wedding ring. Then he wrote his mother, and within a few weeks a small package arrived.

---

Two months later the *Enterprise* was ordered to Earth and Spock made plans to visit T'Ayrian at the Academy. He requested time off and set out to visit her.

As he made his way through the crowded halls to her room, he concluded that he must see to his civilian wardrobe. Being in uniform was a mistake. T'Ayrian was talking with three other females as he neared her open door. She rose and spoke his name softly. When the others had left, Spock asked if he might take her to dinner.

"Yes, of course. I shall require a few minutes to change."

He nodded. When she joined him, he was pleased to see her in Vulcan dress. Less attention would be drawn to them than to an ensign with a commander. As they walked across the parkway to a restaurant, they talked of inconsequential matters.

After the meal, they retraced their steps, with one difference. The parkway was now crowded with couples, some walking arm in arm, others sitting together and embracing. Several couples were kissing.

Spock guided T'Ayrian to a recently vacated bench that afforded some privacy. When they were seated, she asked, "Young humans are most open in their affections. Is this also true of their elders?"

"No. As they mature, they usually conduct this type of behavior in private." He reached inside his tunic and took out a small package. He handed it to T'Ayrian. She opened it and allowed her pleasure to show, as was permitted between bonded couples.

"Spock, it is exquisite! I had not meant for you to be so extravagant."

"I thought it might be awkward for you to just appear one morning wearing a wedding ring. This was my grandmother's engagement ring. It will signify to people that you are betrothed and are to be married. It is one of a set. The wedding ring was buried with her, but I have commissioned a copy to be made. You shall have it when the time - later....Does it please you?"

"Very much so. Is it worn on the third finger also?"

Spock took the ring and slipped it on her finger. She continued to admire it. They resumed walking and had to side-step to avoid bumping into another embracing couple right on the residence's steps. They entered the foyer and T'Ayrian led the way to one of the unoccupied sitting rooms. She

walked over to one of the large windows. Spock followed and stood behind her.

"What is it you find so interesting?"

"The moon. It is so remarkable. I do believe I envy Earth its moon."

"Some day I shall take you to Varon III. It has nine moons, and they make for a most interesting display. *How easily that came out*, he thought. *I do want to show her Varon III. In fact, he realized, there are many things I would like to share with her.*

"I should enjoy that." A couple paused outside the window to embrace. Spock and T'Ayrian moved back into the shadows.

"Spock, this 'kissing'. Has thee ever tried it?"

The question surprised him, but he answered truthfully. "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "Since our marriage?"

"Certainly not!"

"Oh. Did thee find it pleasant?"

He did not think he liked where the conversation was heading. "Yes."

"I should like to try it."

"T'Ayrian, you know why telepathic races do not engage in such practices."

"Yes, but we are married, and I should like to try it. But if you do not wish it...."

He took her in his arms and pulled her gently to him. There were several awkward seconds when her nose seemed to be in the way and she didn't know what to do with her head. He finally took her chin in his hand and tipped her head up to his. Their lips touched lightly for several seconds.

"There is surely more."

He tightened his embrace and kissed her harder, allowing his mouth to open slightly. His body could feel her response as his mind sensed it. These sensations were new to her, but she found them pleasing. She moved closer to him, slipping her arms around his waist, tightening the embrace further, and he could not help but respond. This was dangerous play for telepaths. Because they were bonded, their minds were reaching to one another. Each had little control over what was passing between them. It had been easy for Spock to maintain his defenses with a *non-telepath*, one to whom he was not bonded. This was different. Instinct led. Now that he could see into her mind he was amazed. All his notions about her had been in error.

*She does not want freedom from this marriage. She has no desire to be alone. She wants our marriage to grow, to be a true, complete bonding. And some day to proudly bear our child.*

As all this information flowed from her mind to his, he became caught up in it and forgot that the reverse was also taking place. All his doubts were tumbling into her consciousness. She jerked free of his embrace and with a quivering voice said, "Thee does me an injustice." She turned and tried to flee.

He caught her by the arm. "T'Ayrian, allow me to..."

"No, Spock. Thee goes too far. I waited on Vulcan, but thee did not visit. I thought thee might find discomfort in the home of my father, so I took separate lodging, but still thee did not come. I came to you. Now I find thee holds only contempt for our marriage. This I will not accept." She fled from the room while he stood there, stunned.

---

Once out of the building, Spock walked aimlessly, trying to sort things out. *Visit her?* He remembered T'Ayrian's many questions about Starfleet's leave procedures. And the pass her father had given him that allowed him free passage. He had thought his father-in-law had meant it for emergency use, such as the Pon Farr or perhaps an illness in the family. *What a dull-wit I've been!* There had been at least two different occasions when he was close enough to Vulcan to have gone home.

He sunk down on an empty bench. He had what could have been a solid marriage, the kind he had always hoped to have, and now it was over before it had begun. *Am I just going to walk away and do nothing? No! I must try to resolve this.*

He walked back through the now deserted parkway to T'Ayrian's residence. He went in and up to her room without being seen, and knocked softly on her door.

"Who is there?"

"Spock."

"Thee should not be here now."

"I would speak with you."

"I do not wish it."

"Would you prefer that I make a scene?"

The door opened and he stepped inside. Her voice was tight. "I suppose we should settle this. I shall start divorce proceedings."

"Is there no other way?"

"Spock, where there is no trust, there can be no true bonding. I will not endure such a marriage. Obviously thee has held these doubts from the very beginning. I do not understand how T'Mal failed to detect them."

"She did. We discussed it at length. She did much to reassure me. In the end she was satis-

fied."

"She was mistaken."

"You can see no way to resolve this?"

"No."

"Then if you would indulge me by answering one question, I will leave and cause you no further distress."

"Question?"

"Why did you wish a marriage with me? It would not seem to be in your best interest."

"By whose standards?"

"Thee had other suitors."

"Yes."

"None were in Starfleet, or lived off Vulcan."

"No."

"None had a Kal-if-Fee."

"No."

"Then why me? Why not one of them?"

"They were all old men, Spock; even the young ones."

"Explain."

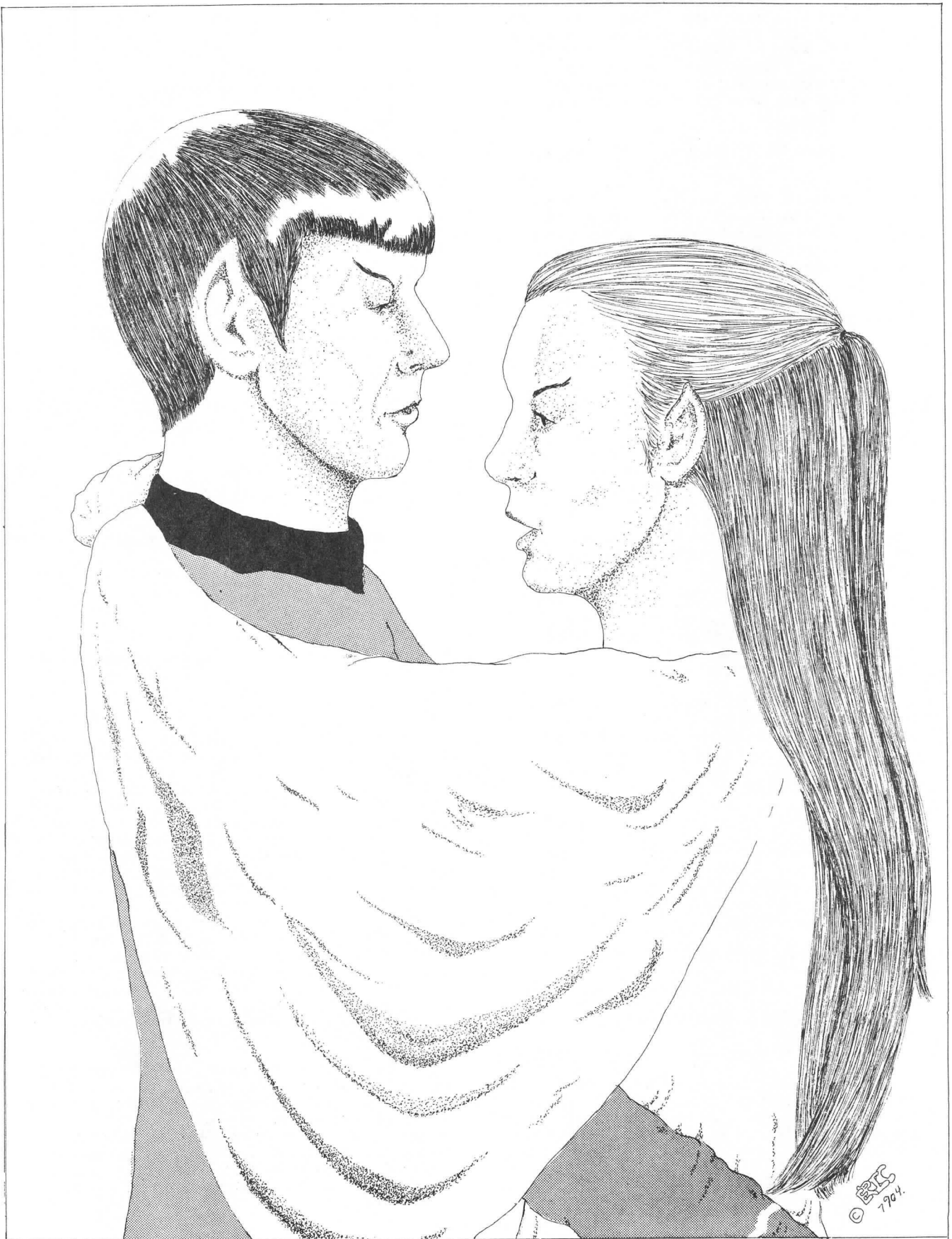
"Spock, I see no point to this under the circumstances."

"Indulge me."

"Very well. When the question of another mate was put to me, I was forced to deeply examine what I would consider important in a mate. I did not take this task lightly, for I had an opportunity that does not come to most Vulcans. During the process of attempting to discover what qualities I valued in a mate, I came to a deeper awareness of myself and of my own values. I discovered that I *do* hold our traditions to be of supreme importance, but I also have private hopes for my own life.

"As I met the males my father had selected as suitable for me, I was not overly impressed. My father suggested waiting another turning. He thought that perhaps I was not over my bereavement and that therefore no suitor would be acceptable to me. I knew in my heart this was not so. Under no circumstances would I have found those males suitable.

"I was looking for something more, and until I met you it was a nameless thing. Then while reading your portfolio and later your papers, I caught a hint of what it was I was searching for. It was in your eyes the day we met, a drive to reach out, to go and seek beyond boundaries, and I knew that thee had the qualities that I wished for in a mate. In you I had hoped to combine both duty and personal desire.



"Spock, thee are the first Vulcan I have ever met who has dared to dream and then to follow that dream."

"And now it is over."

"So it would seem."

"I would not have it so."

"Spock, now it is I who no longer trust. The betrayal I feel..." She stopped and stared at him as realization dawned. "Betrayal...Spock, thee too has suffered this betrayal." Her voice softened. "In my self-concern I had forgotten. How inconsiderate I am. The ordeal with T'Pring is not that far in the past, but surely thee has settled that matter within thyself?"

"What is to be settled? She preferred another."

"You asked her reason?"

"Of course. She said she pre..."

"Spock, that was said when emotions were surfacing. Surely you followed up, later?"

"No...Am I to understand that you did?" he asked, startled out of his complacency.

"Yes, Spock. I told you I did not take my opportunity lightly."

In the recesses of his mind, he noted that T'Ayrian had reverted to the informal 'you'. "What action did you take?"

"I studied the personality quotient tests, as I assumed you had."

"What did you expect to find? The tests were administered when T'Pring and I were children, and showed a high correlation -- higher in fact than ours."

"I saw those results, but I went further. Spock, did you not compare your test as a child with the one administered for our portfolio?"

"No. There would be no difference. Those tests are reliable to..."

"I suggest you take a look. There are a great many discrepancies."

The light dawned. "My human heritage..."

"I suspect so. At this point in time, you and T'Pring have very little in common, and I believe if you could compare her tests now with the one from her childhood, you would find very little difference. It is *you* who has changed." She paused.

"Spock, do you recall the self-evaluation you wrote at that time?"

He nodded, wondering where she was leading.

"What was your primary goal?"

"A science chair at the Academy."

"I found that most enlightening because, when you were offered a chance to study there and thus prepare for such a position, you chose Starfleet instead."

"There were some things within myself that needed settling first. I still have that goal."

"But for when? When you are retired from Starfleet and can no longer travel space."

"Yes," he answered as he realized that she understood him better than he understood himself.

"Spock, I cannot fault you for the betrayal you feel. T'Pring's actions were most unforgivable, but I will not live my life in her shadow. I will not be faulted for her actions."

"T'Ayrian, before I came here this evening, I had resolved these matters within myself. The reason for the ring was to show my commitment to our marriage. If you would but look deep into my mind, you would see that those doubts are no longer there."

"You see a chance for us then?"

"Yes, if we are both willing."

There was a slight quiver in her voice. "Spock, these...emotions...are so new to me. First rejection, and now hope. How do I know which to trust, which to follow?"

"Perhaps if we were to meld again, you could see what is in my heart."

"To use a meld in such a way is a desperate measure."

"This is a desperate situation."

"You wish not to be parted from me?"

"Very much so."

He approached her, and as he reached out his hand to touch her face and thereby join their minds, she said, "We melded earlier this evening using a different technique."

He deliberately took her into his arms and kissed her. As they embraced and their minds blended, both knew that this bonding would not be broken.

*For Elizabeth*

Come with me now, Elizabeth, and dare  
Grow wings, such slender, feathered, tapered things  
As we can ride into the sparkling air  
On currents strong and free. We shall be kings  
Of sky and air and land, of all we see.  
Such strange new worlds we'll share, and even time  
Will fall beneath our silver gaze. Let be  
The past. Discard it like a worn-out rhyme.

Come with me now, Elizabeth, and leave  
Humanity behind. Fear not. Be bold.  
What matter these, the remnants of a past  
Great race? The silver dreams we weave,  
The worlds we make, are ours alone. Behold,  
We are the bright new gods. Our reign shall last.

*Anne  
Elizabeth  
Leek*

*For Elizabeth*

*I cannot here remain, Elizabeth.  
This world of yours ~ so bleak, so sere ~ will drain  
My strength, my soul. To stay would be my death.  
I seek my name, my home, my past. What gain  
I here, to halt my quest and tempt my fate?  
The siren song of home still calls to me,  
And lures me down to ocean deeps where wait  
The mysteries of life. I must go free.*

*And yet ~ Elizabeth, how can I leave?  
Because of you my life can now begin  
Anew. You gave me breath, then bid me go.  
I left, but could not stay. I saw you grieve.  
I touched your tears and sensed the salt within.  
I've found my home and cannot leave you so.*

*Anne  
Elizabeth  
Leek*

# THE GREY PLAIN

JENNIFER WESTON

The chains between his ankles and wrists grated on the hard surface as Spock ran his hands back and forth across it, extending his arms as far as the bonds would allow, dragging his legs after him. Such a small object to search for in the dark. The circle. He must be careful to watch for that, also. Spock continued to crawl forward, hands still searching, eyes and ears straining for any sight, any sound....

A glowing stripe. He froze. It marked the edge of his holding area. Beyond was the invisible energy field, waiting to set his nervous system on fire again. He turned aside and resumed his search, cautiously staying parallel to the circular boundary.

Something moved. Something other than the chains clinked on the hardness. He reached again, touching something higher than the surface, grasping it. A cylinder twenty centimeters long, with the usual liquid content. Spock took hold of the cap, paused. All appetite had been atrophied with his desire to live, but if he did not eat, *They* would force-feed him again. He could face continued existence sooner than that prospect.

Mechanically, he pried off the cap and raised the opening to his lips. The chains fastening his wrists to his waist were too short to let him tilt the cylinder any further, so he turned on his back, let the tasteless liquid flow into his mouth, swallowed it slowly. The cylinder, bereft of its

contents, dissipated in his hand.

Spock remained where he was, staring up into the blackness, waiting. They would come soon. In the meanwhile he had no motivation to move. No hope. No future.

Dawn came as abruptly as it always did. The void above him suddenly turned iron-grey. Resolutely, Spock assumed a sitting position. He could see the circle now, twenty meters in diameter. And *Them*. Six of *Them* this time, crouching at even intervals around the circle, staring at him. Spock lowered his face. It was easier than trying to meet those unmoving, implacable eyes, gazing into his inner self. Their mentalities, if that was the right word for them, functioned on a different level than his own. To his subconscious mind *They* had complete and unequivocal access, but they could not probe his conscious mind, only force images upon it.

They started to move toward him. Slowly. *They* had time in abundance here. Spock lowered his eyes further as they neared him, until he was looking down at himself. He experienced a sense of loathing at the sight of the chains on his limbs, symbols of his helplessness, and wished it were dark again so he wouldn't be able to see them.

As *They* closed in around him he shut his eyes, cringing inwardly at the prospect of being touched. He heard *Them* bending over him, sensed one of *Them*

lowering its head beside his own.

*//Are you ready to tell us yet?//*

The words had been implanted directly into his brain. Spock shut his conscious mind against the questioner's channel. He felt the other's probes, testing his defenses; it withdrew and Spock clenched his jaw involuntarily. The chains clanked as *They* took hold of him, their touch like gelatin over steel, and lifted him from the hard surface. Spock stiffened in their grip, knowing there was no way to defend himself against what was about to happen to him.

As slowly as *They* had approached, *They* carried him to the circle's center, and paused there for a long moment, paying homage to their gods of pain. Among their kind, torture was a religious ceremony. Spock's breathing quickened as he waited for it to begin. One last time *They* inquired if he had changed his mind, and at his rejection, calmly informed him that he had brought this on himself.

The nightmares began. Images of terror, dredged from his darkest subconscious, seared across his mind's eye with more vividness than any reality. Gigantic black maelstroms, shark-like shadows arrowing up from bottomless depths, snake-like forms lashing in every direction; more surreal visions, unidentifiable and profoundly terrifying. Only slightly less horrendous, the voice of his interrogator breaking in at irregular intervals: *//Tell us how you came here. Tell us what method is used to reach the other Universe.//* With every refusal he was punished with another writhing swarm of nightmare images. Uselessly, Spock struggled to shut them out, until the level of exhaustion in the other minds finally matched his own and he felt himself being set down. The first moment of release was as agonizing as the interrogation, for it was always accompanied by a warning that this would happen to him again unless he provided the information.

He took no notice of how or when *They* left him, shuddering violently where he lay as he sought to salvage some fiber of composure. Gradually his body calmed, but the trembling sickness in his mind remained. For he knew now that he was indeed losing his grasp on sanity. Every previous questioning had taken longer to recover from, wearing down his defenses to the point of assuring the damage from the next one would be permanent.

Over an hour passed before he sat up again. Listlessly, he gazed across the plain - the flat, grey plain, with no reference points in any direction - to where the horizon merged imperceptibly with the sky. This entire universe seemed but a featureless iron-colored expanse, marked only by the dimly glowing circle which had become his whole world.

For a brief period, it had been occupied by two.

But Jim had been much more susceptible to *Their* questioning methods, had sustained his reason through only three sessions. Spock remembered how they had clung to each other after being released for the third time, trembling and overwrought,

until abruptly nightfall came; he remembered Kirk's last moments of sanity, whispering in blackness.

"Can't...Spock, *They're*...getting to me... the melds aren't helping enough. *They..* Spock, we can't let them know how to...to get into our universe. If *They* ever got through...beings that only care about manipulating things, with such access to the subconscious...Spock," Kirk's voice had suddenly become firm, "Spock, if I start to break, you must kill me."

Nothing *They* had done to Spock before or since had equalled the anguish of that moment. Though he had realized the necessity, he'd murmured pleadingly, "Jim, no, not..."

But Kirk's hands had tightened on his forearms, and the last coherent words Spock ever heard from him were spoken in the final tone of a Command Decision: "That's an order, Spock."

Five hours later, after the fourth session had been completed, Spock had carried out that order.

But Spock? Who would kill him after his own mentality had been damaged beyond all repair? Who would kneel beside him as he lay, face down, sobbing, in the center of the circle, and apply the swift, merciful pressure to the base of his neck, ending torment, insanity, life....

The only alternative: his mind reduced to a shattered ruin for *Them* to sift through as *They* willed, to find the one piece of knowledge *They* desired. And once *They* had it...

Almost reflexively, Spock lifted his eyes to the grey sky, toward that gateway between universes which he alone knew how to transverse. As he gazed, his sense of reality forsook him for a moment. It seemed as though he were looking across a table like the ones in the *Enterprise's* rec room.

Doctor McCoy and Engineer Scott were sitting across from each other at the other end, both older and sadder than when he'd last seen them, a bottle and two filled glasses between them. McCoy took a small sip from his own glass and spoke pensively. "The cruel part of it is not knowing for sure what's happened to them. Knowing they were dead would be a reality to learn to accept, but to see them sucked into that vortex and never finding out where it sent them..." Bones paused, staring forlornly into his glass.

"They didn't have any choice," the tired-sounding engineer reminded. "It would have been death for certain to stay in that breaking area any longer. Whatever they went to through that hole in the space fabric, it was their only alternative."

"Yeah. I just wish I could know once and for all if there's any possibility of their ever finding their way back....Well, at least there's always a chance for them to be happy on the other side, so long as they're together." McCoy lifted his glass again. "That's one hope I'll always cherish: that they're alive, and happy, somewhere..."

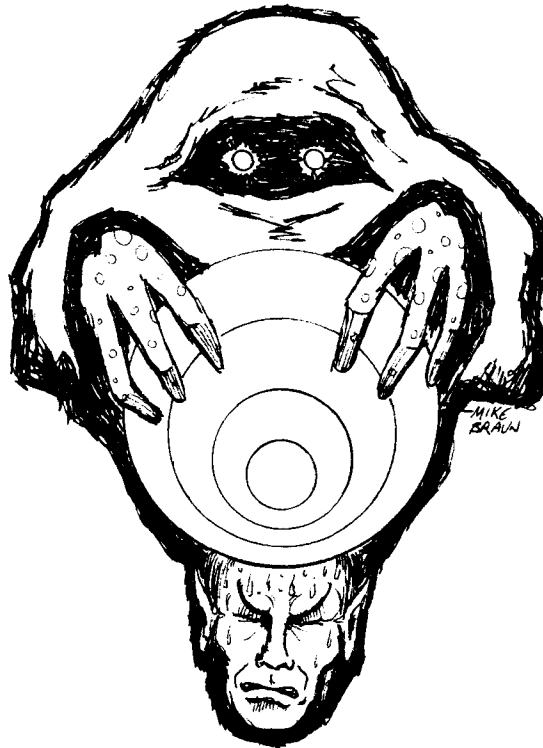
The vision faded, and Spock shut his eyes. Whether it was a momentary telepathic intersection with his own world, or the product of his overstimulated imagination, did not matter. They, Scott and McCoy, were free, not crushed under the subconscious tyranny of a race interested only in controlling others; free with their false hopes. Spock could not, as he had hoped to do, hold off until the atmospheric conditions reached the state where he might be able to make the return to his universe and relieve them of that burden. But he could make sure they would continue to live, perhaps always saddened and tormented by uncertainty, but free.

Soon, Spock would be free. There was yet one escape from this circle, the one he had given to Jim. He would follow him...follow, perhaps, to something other than non-existence.

He had long since planned out the method. He drew his legs up to his chest, blocked his mouth and nostrils between his knees, relaxed experimentally to make sure his breathing passages would remain closed after he had employed the complete relaxation of mind and body. Yes, it would serve his purpose.

Spock pressed his face deeper between his legs, and concentrated for a few seconds. It was still his mind. *They* would never change that now. At his command, his body went limp. A feeling of final release, similar to what he'd sensed in Kirk the moment after he'd applied Tal Shaya, was the last thing he was aware of before he lost consciousness.

When *They* returned, *They* found only a motionless form hunched in the center of the circle, like a fetus in a dead womb.



---

Winter dreams  
black-gnarled  
snow-glazed  
ice-weighted  
branches ruptured  
bleeding sap  
hanging shriven  
unleaved  
in Spring

Kathy Esselman

# WHEN WORDS COLLIDE

## Jennifer Weston

SCENE I:

Matte shot of *Enterprise* in distance against starfield, slowly moving closer.

KIRK:

Stargram to: Ms. N. Osely, Residence V-37j412, State of California, United States of America, Planet Earth, Sol sector. Stardate 8542.2.

Dear Ms. Osely: This is in response to your communication of '39.9, wherein you explained you were preparing a written work of the Most Embarrassing Moments in the Lives of Celebrities, and requested that I send you a detailed account of the most "mortifying experience" of my career. (PAUSE) *Ahem.* Frankly, Ms. Osely, my initial impulse was to drop your letter down the nearest disposal-slot. However, it occurred to me that such a response might reinforce the popular image of the starship captain as snobbish and aloof. So instead, I am sending you this account, without permission to publish -- repeat, *without* permission to publish -- to try to illustrate why I cannot honor your request. At least, not while I retain my present position. A starship captain, after all, must command respect if he is to function at all.

Close in on top of disk and dissolve to interior of bridge. KIRK is seated in the command chair, obviously listening intently to the chair-arm intercom. LT. LESLIE is manning the computer station; UHURA, the communications board; and SULU is alone at the navigation console.

KIRK (V.O.):

It was Stardate 7523.1 when the *Enterprise* received orders to report to the planet Vulcan. The new T'Trev Academy of Ionic Research had just been completed, and there was to be a very prestigious dedication ceremony. Delegates from every Federation world were to be there, as well as a number of Vulcan's most important rulers. The *Enterprise* crew had been selected to represent Star Fleet, with myself as the chief delegate. (SUDDENLY WEARY) And I came up with this *brilliant* idea for making a good impression. (END V.O.)

KIRK:  
(straightens and shuts off intercom)

Uhura, acknowledge that message.

UHURA:

Yes, Captain.

She bends over her board.

KIRK:

Sulu, lay in course for Vulcan, ahead warp-factor four.

SULU:

Warp four, sir.

He manipulates the necessary controls.

KIRK:  
Estimated time of arrival?

SULU:  
Six point five standard days, sir.

KIRK:  
(to himself)  
Six point five days, eh?

For a few seconds, Kirk looks thoughtful,  
finally turns to computer station.

KIRK:  
Did Mr. Spock mention where he was going, Lieutenant Leslie?

LESLIE:  
(looking up from scanner)  
I heard Mr. Chekov invite him to a chess game in Rec Room Five during their lunch hour, Captain.

KIRK:  
Thank you.  
He stands and turns toward turbolift.

KIRK:  
Uhura, you have the conn.

UHURA:  
Aye, sir.  
She moves toward the command chair as KIRK disappears into the lift. CUT TO:

# SCENE II:

Rec Room. Close-up on 3-D chess set; from the positions of the pieces, it's apparent a game is in progress. Pull back to show CHEKOV and SPOCK seated on either side; CHEKOV is staring at the board with exaggerated concentration while SPOCK waits patiently. Finally, CHEKOV moves a piece, looks triumphantly toward SPOCK, who regards the board for less than two seconds before moving one of his own pieces.

SPOCK:  
Check.

CHEKOV:  
(curls lip in mock exasperation)  
I don't know why I ever ask *you* to play chess. You always beat me.

SPOCK:  
(slightly surprised)  
The enjoyment of playing, not winning, is supposed to be the game's objective, Ensign.

CHEKOV:  
(making another move)  
Try telling that to someone who's lost seventeen games in a row.

SPOCK moves one more piece, setting it down with a finalistic thump. CHEKOV glares at the board.

CHEKOV:  
*Eighteen* games in a row.

Beyond them, the rec room door opens and KIRK enters. Spotting SPOCK and CHEKOV, he saunters over to them.

KIRK:  
Good afternoon, gentlemen.

SPOCK:  
Good afternoon, Captain.

CHEKOV:  
'Afternoon, sir.

SPOCK:  
Spock, are you busy right now?

SPOCK:  
No longer, Captain.  
He starts to reposition the chess pieces for the next game.

CHEKOV:  
(mischievously)  
He wants to quit while he's only three games behind.  
That's gets him the infamous Vulcan Stare; wisely, he scuttles away from the table.

CHEKOV:  
I'll be reporting back to post now, Keptin.

KIRK smiles after the ensign, and takes his place in the chair.

SPOCK:  
Would you like a game, sir?

KIRK:  
Not right now, thank you. I came to ask you a favor.  
SPOCK looks up receptively.

KIRK:  
The *Enterprise* is going to represent Star Fleet at the T'Trev Academy dedication, and I've been instructed to put the best possible foot forward...

SPOCK:  
I shall be glad to act as chief delegate, Captain.

KIRK:  
(dangerously)  
That is *not* what I was going to request, Spock.

SPOCK pretends to be surprised.

KIRK:  
I have already been appointed chief delegate. What I want *you* to do is to teach me some of your native language.

SPOCK:  
(suddenly doubtful)  
For what purpose?

KIRK:  
It occurred to me that I could make a favorable impression by greeting those Vulcan officials in their own tongue.

SPOCK:  
It may not be a good idea, Jim. Vulcan is notoriously difficult for a human to learn, particularly on such short notice.

KIRK:  
I'm not talking about learning the whole language. Just a few phrases, courtesies. (SMILES AMIABLY)  
Let me give it a try, Spock.

SPOCK hesitates, but yields to the 'try me' expression in KIRK's eyes.

SPOCK:  
Very well, Captain. Meet me in my quarters after the second shift for your first lesson.

KIRK:  
I'll be there.

He stands, gives SPOCK a reassuring clap on the shoulder, and strides out. SPOCK absently resumes arranging the chess pieces. It is obvious from his expression that he has misgivings about this matter. CUT TO:

SCENE III:  
Spock's quarters. KIRK and SPOCK are seated beside each other at the desk. A viewer and a stack of cassettes are visible at the left, but have apparently been

abandoned for more personal teaching methods. SPOCK is listening carefully as KIRK struggles through the latest lesson.

KIRK:  
(cautiously)  
Ker-qim stich-yam...No. No. Kerqim stizyalscrit... stizh-yam scre... (BREAKS OFF) How does that go again?

SPOCK:  
(articulating effortlessly)  
Kerqmm stzhyalmskrk.

KIRK:  
(a little resentfully)  
Why are Vulcan words so hard to pronounce?

SPOCK:  
We do not find them so.

KIRK:  
Well *I* do. Let's go back to that greeting again; what was it?

SPOCK:  
Glubegk enkov.

KIRK:  
(slower)  
Glubegk enkov.

He does not place the stresses in exactly the same places.

SPOCK:  
No, Captain. (REPEATS EXACTLY AS BEFORE) Glubegk enkov.

KIRK:  
Glubegk enkov.  
Still not quite right. KIRK is obviously getting annoyed at himself for making so many mistakes.

KIRK:  
(snaps)  
Does the exact pronunciation matter so much?

SPOCK:  
Indeed it does, Jim. Slight variations may completely alter a word's meaning. You must keep in mind that a Vulcan's hearing is much more acute than a human's.

SPOCK shows no sign of impatience; KIRK looks a little ashamed for complaining so much.

KIRK:

I'm sorry...Why don't we go over some more points of Vulcan etiquette and come back to this later?

SPOCK:  
(glad to comply)

Very well. As a guest, it will be in your place to choose the subject of conversation. Any field of science you are familiar with, or any unclassified activity in Star Fleet, may be appropriate.  
(PAUSE) Incidentally, Jim, should we happen to meet T'Pau, I would appreciate it if you would make no reference to...

KIRK:  
(hastily)

Of course not, Spock.

SPOCK:

Thank you. (CONTINUES) Many of the Vulcan officials present will be of Surak's family. These may be identified by the design of their medallions; something like three fires sprouting from a central disk. The standard gesture of respect to make to such a person is to say, "My admiration for your three ancestors". That refers to the three children of Surak, from whom...

KIRK:  
How do you say that in Vulcan?

SPOCK:  
Rirthdgfen k'omn trgr schlendptca.

KIRK:  
(effortfully)  
Rirth digfen kom...rirthd gifen kom trig...  
He's starting to get irritated again.

KIRK:  
Rirthd gifen kom trg...

SPOCK:  
K'omn trgr.

KIRK:  
(louder than necessary)  
Rirthdfen komn trigr schlandrip...

SPOCK:  
Captain, perhaps we should finish something simpler first. Try once more: Ker-qmm, stzh-yalm-skrk.

Almost fidgeting with frustration, KIRK shuts his eyes in preparation. PULL BACK as he continues to recite the syllables with varying degrees of success, and SPOCK continues to correct him. FADE TO:

Matte shot of *Enterprise* orbiting mottled-orange planet Vulcan.

KIRK (V.O.):

I suppose I should have recognized the warning signals then, and given up the whole idea. But if you've heard the rumors about my persistence, that I have a tendency to keep fighting against all odds - even when quitting would be a lot smarter - well, they happen to be true. I had Spock continue the lessons against his better judgment, until, by the time we reached Vulcan, I was certain that I could speak a few phrases like a native. (END V.O.)

CUT TO:

SCENE IV:

Front hall of the T'Trev Academy, a spacious white-tiled room, tastefully decorated with various potted flora. In the back-wall is the brightly-lighted entrance to the reception area. The ceremonies have not yet started and many of the delegates are taking advantage of the opportunity to mingle informally before going into the reception room. Several dozen humans, Andorians, Tellarites, and Vulcans are talking in small clusters or strolling among the plants.

KIRK, SPOCK, SCOTT and CHEKOV are all in dress uniform, and walk in from the right. KIRK pauses to look his people over, notices MR. SCOTT's glum expression.

KIRK:  
Why the long face, Scotty? This is supposed to be a joyous occasion.

SCOTT:  
"Joyous"? Have ya never been to a reception on Vulcan, Captain?

KIRK:  
No, I haven't. What's so tragic about them?

SPOCK:  
I believe Mr. Scott may be referring to the absence of any intoxicating beverages, Captain.

CHEKOV, who apparently hadn't know either, looks suddenly dismayed.

CHEKOV:  
(plaintively)  
Not even wodka?

KIRK:  
(searching for a bright spot)

Well...look at it this way, Scotty; you'll be happy about it tomorrow morning.

SCOTT:  
(gloomily)

Tomorrow mornin's fourteen hours away.

Straightening his shoulders as though resolved to get this over with as soon as possible, SCOTT marches to the reception area doorway, with CHEKOV trailing disinterestedly behind. As they enter, a very distinguished-looking Vulcan of about one hundred, SARVEEN, emerges. He spots KIRK and SPOCK on the other side of the room, looking over the gathering, and crosses to them. He raises his hand in salute as he comes up.

SARVEEN:

I am Sarveen, Sub-director of this Academy. Star Fleet honors us with your presence.

KIRK:

The honor is all ours, Sub-director. Star Fleet wishes me to convey their most sincere wish for the success of your institution.

SARVEEN nods in acknowledgement.

KIRK:

Kerqmm stzhyaImskrK.

The Sub-director is visible impressed.

SARVEEN:

Director T'Trev waits within to greet you.

KIRK:

We shall be there within a few minutes.

As SARVEEN turns and walks back inside, KIRK flashes a triumphant smile at SPOCK.

KIRK:

How was that?

SPOCK:  
(guardedly)

Considering that you had only six days preparation, your articulation so far has been adroit.

KIRK:  
(with pretended exasperation)

Does that translate to "You're doing well"? Spock, stop worrying about getting me over-confident. I've got it licked now. Didn't I have a superb instructor?

SPOCK:

Agreed, sir.

KIRK:

Oh, Spock, you really *must* get over this excessive

KIRK (continued):

modesty.

By now, most of the delegates are beginning to file into the reception area; KIRK and SPOCK follow after them. CUT TO:

SCENE V:

The reception area, a larger version of the front hall, but with brighter lighting, and refreshment tables lining the walls. MR. SCOTT stands beside one, forlornly looking over the multi-colored decanters. As SPOCK comes through the doorway, behind KIRK and a number of other delegates, SCOTT looks up and calls to him.

SCOTT:

Mr. Spock?

Spock glances toward the engineer, and comes over to him.

SCOTT:

Do you recognize anythin' here that might be fit fer a man to drink?

SPOCK regards the assortment for a few seconds, finally indicates a red decanter.

SPOCK:

Luringk extract contains substantial amounts of Vitamin A, while the Octowf has...

SCOTT:

That's fruit juice! Isn't there anythin' with a bit o' *flavor*?

SPOCK considers a moment, then points out a delicate yellow-green beverage. SCOTT examines it, pours himself a small glass, and sniffs it. Apparently he likes what he smells.

SPOCK:

Concentrated essence of Solmjex, a melon with a chemical composition very similar to Earth's *capsicum*.

SCOTT:  
(raising the glass)

What's *capsicum*?

He takes his first swallow, and his eyes shoot wide open.

SPOCK:  
(all innocence)

It's common name is tabasco pepper.

With his jaw threatening to become

disconnected, SCOTT sets down the glass and clutches his throat. SPOCK hefts a colorless decanter.

SPOCK:

Some water?

Glaring accusingly, SCOTT extends his glass and, as the Vulcan starts to pour, begins an incoherent, furious mumbling.

SPOCK:

Mr. Scott, I remind you that you are presently acting as a representative of Star Fleet. If you feel the need to employ such terminology, I suggest that you take it out of this room.

Still glaring, SCOTT downs the water in one gulp. CUT TO:

KIRK, casually making his way through the crowd toward SARVEEN, now in conversation with a very tall Vulcan woman whose back is toward KIRK. SARVEEN sees the captain and motions him over.

SARVEEN:

Captain Kirk, allow me to present the founder of this institution: Director T'Trev.

Hold on T'TREV's face. Here is an individual of T'Pau's caliber, only more so: regal, sagacious, supremely dignified; the sort of person one immediately wants to make the best impression on.

KIRK gives the hand salute, which T'TREV returns.

KIRK:

Glubegk enkov, Director.

T'TREV:  
(deep, solemn tone)

Glubegk enkov. Thee are most welcome here, Kirk of Star Fleet.

Over her shoulder, SPOCK can be seen approaching the group, but, realizing that T'TREV and KIRK are in the middle of exchanging greetings, he halts several feet away.

KIRK:

I am greatly honored.

At this point, he notices her pendant: three flames from a disk, just as SPOCK described.

KIRK:

You are a descendant of Surak, Ma'am?

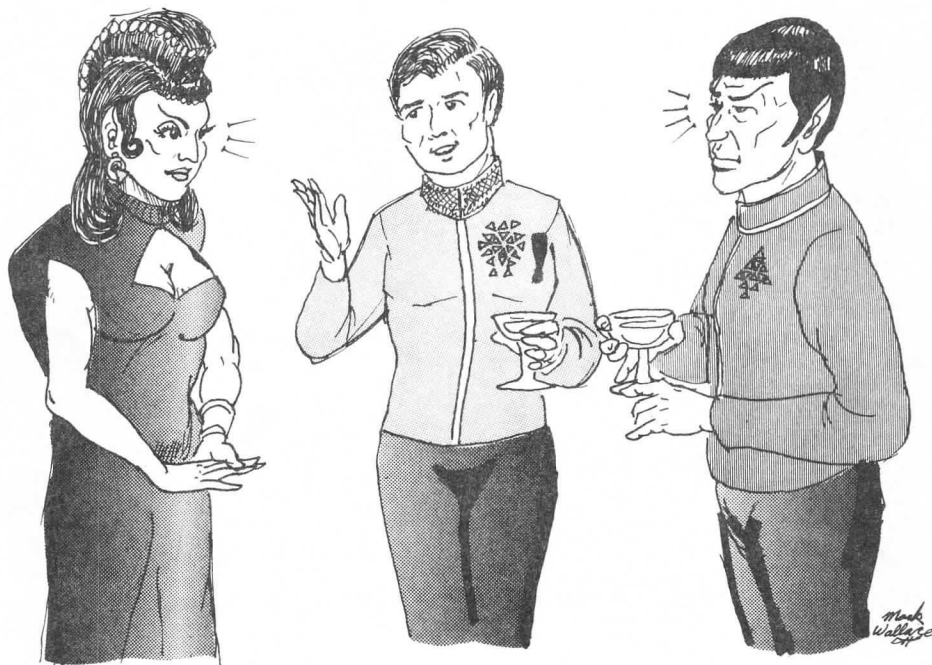
T'TREV:  
(with special gravity)

Correct. My family is of T'Thame's lineage.

KIRK:  
(snapping to his best form)

Birthdrgfen k'omn trgr schlenpitdca.

T'TREV only nods politely, but behind her, one of SPOCK's eyebrows makes a long, slow journey to his hairline.



T'TREV:

Thee will please extend my gratitude to Star Fleet for their assistance in the building of this academy.

KIRK:  
(slightly uneasy)

I will do that, Director.

SPOCK is staring fixedly at KIRK over T'TREV's shoulder; the human finds this distracting.

KIRK:

Oh...I just remembered, I must check in with my ship. If you will excuse me, Ma'am.

T'TREV:

Thee are excused.

KIRK bows, and starts back across the room. As he comes alongside SPOCK, he signals him to follow. The Vulcan does, and they walk back to the front hall, now deserted. The second they're through the doorway, KIRK whirls on SPOCK.

KIRK:  
(snaps)

All right, Spock; what's the matter?

SPOCK folds his arms with an air of vague disapproval.

SPOCK:

Captain, I do not believe you are aware of what you just said to T'Trev.

KIRK:

Why, I said... (SUDDENLY NOT SO CERTAIN) I said "My admiration for your three ancestors..." (PAUSE) Didn't I?

SPOCK shakes his head once, briskly.

KIRK:

Well, then, Mr. Spock, suppose you tell me what I *did* say.

SPOCK:  
(slowly, making every word count)

Your exact words were: "My admiration for your three breasts."

KIRK's expression suggests that if he could die right there, he would live happily ever after.

KIRK:  
(aghast)

I said...?!

Mercilessly, SPOCK nods.

KIRK:

Spock, she *couldn't* have...*Surely* she must have known that I hadn't meant to say...

SPOCK:  
(finally showing compassion)

I am quite certain she did, sir.

KIRK:  
(eagerly)

You are? She knew it was only a mispronunciation?

SPOCK:

Director T'Trev is fully aware that humans are highly prone to error, Jim.

KIRK:  
(too relieved to get offended)

Oh, I hope so!

He glances reluctantly over his shoulder.

KIRK:

They'll be wondering what happened to us. I suppose we'd better get back in there.

SPOCK:

Agreed. (AS THEY TURN:) And, Captain, may I recommend that you refrain from attempting to speak any more Vulcan for the remainder of our stay here?

KIRK:  
(heartfelt)

Recommendation noted, Mr. Spock!

Pull back as they walk back inside.  
FADE TO:

Matte shot of starfield with *Enterprise* crossing from left to right, slowly fading in the distance.

KIRK (V.O.):

You will now understand why I cannot afford to have this story published, Ms. Osely. The embarrassment to me, should a member of my crew acquire a copy of your book, would give even *this* event competition. But, lest you accuse me of waving a piece of meat in front of a starving dog, I promise that I *shall* give you authorization to publish as soon as I retire from the service. That should happen...oh, say, thirty years from now...?

FADE OUT.

THE END

# THE TASTE OF SUNSETS

Ingrid Cross

The ground's chest was stone-cold, tomb-damp, the clouds a falsetto cheeriness against a flaming sky. My back kicked in protest against the clammy soil. I could feel my tired lungs draw in yet another seared load of radiation-tinged air.

*[Always, I had thought I would be among the Enterprise's crew at the end. With the others, I had sat through many accumulated hours when Jim Kirk fought with all his skill and stubbornness to buy more time. I had faced death before and had never found myself wanting at the crucial moments. But never had I anticipated such a lonely, cruel and godforsaken death.]*

"Know something?" Chris asked. Her voice: controlled, deliberately calm, permitting no anxiety or fear to seep from the edges.

"Hmmm?" Lately when she spoke, the only answer I could give was a casual hum from my aching throat.

*[The sunsets had been our only companionship...our solitary diversion. For when this alien sun dipped below the hostile horizon, we knew we had won some small battle from our captors. No one came near (our opponents remained triumphantly invisible) and we had exhausted our excess energy days earlier in useless conversation. So we counted the sunsets, for want of other entertainment.]*

The sun's fiery descent into its nightly cradle illuminated her face. Her voice: tinged now with all our disappointments, faded hopes and soured dreams, the sense of time pouring through a broken egg-timer.

"I have come to hate this time, Uhura," Chris whispered weakly. The tone of finality was not disagreeable to me.

For we recognized this as our final sunset.

# THE ANATOMY OF SHADOW

DYANE KIRKLAND



## Xet, 6097

The stone keep faced north, looking out from high above the sprawling tentacles of Arazkhat. Dark and sinister, it served as an omnipresent reminder of the ruler of the continent for which the city was named. Arazkhat - the ancestral home of the Sith Dark Lords, shining with an unholy light: a reflection of the dying sea and the waning moons.

The lower floors of the keep were dark at this hour, a sense of immense age pervading the empty halls. Those who worked on these levels at the behest of duty had retired for the evening and left the aged stone to its timeless brooding. Even the lost souls of the dungeons made no sounds to disturb the almost tangible silence.

Higher up in the keep, lights shone, but they were few. The residents of the Dark Lord's palace - both willing and unwilling - were long abed. Only in one wing did the lights glow; only in the royal quarters - in one particular room - did the lights shine brightly, glaring from burnished black metal.

Fifteen years ago, on an ill-fated day on far-off Alderaan, Darth Vader had made a nearly fatal mistake. Since that time, a mask of metal and a casing of armor had been both his dwelling place and his means of survival. Fifteen years had passed since Lord Darth Vader, mightiest of all the Sith Dark Lords, had seen more than a glimpse of his own face.

In the beginning of that nightmare, when every moment had been a bitter struggle for survival, his imprisonment had been a small price - one he willingly had paid. There were even benefits to be reaped: the terror in which his soldiers held him; the power it had given him over "normal" beings. He had used it for his own ends, and yes, even enjoyed it. Odd that this, his natal day, should bring back memories of his life before imprisonment in that metallic shell; should make him think about what his life would have been without it. Would he have been a normal Dark Lord (if Dark Lords were ever considered normal), content to lead his people on incursions of the galaxy, eking a meager existence out of the spoils? Or leading his people on a mission of conquest, saying goodbye to this glacier-covered world and its dying sun? Or perhaps marrying the woman he cared for. She *would* be a woman now, the little Jedi with the courage and power to match his ambitions. Or perhaps, instead, that pretty-but-sly bitch his father had favored as his mate? (What designs had she had on Darth's throne - and his life? Where had they taken her in the end?) Or, perhaps, he would have emulated his revered teacher: married no one, held himself solely to the Jedi Order? What might it be like to join the normal population of his subject city as one more Sith, one inconspicuous person among the masses? If he could -- if he dared...

Metal chin on gloved fist, Darth stared at the polished glass for some time without moving. Then, with a barely audible growl, he unfastened the Sith bell helmet that he habitually wore, and removed it. Bending closer to the mirror now, he carefully studied the exposed skin near the hairline of his forehead. The dark, wavy hair that fell to cover

his forehead was pushed impatiently out of the way; a grunt of satisfaction came from the breathscreen as he completed his examination. The skin was pale, of course, as only a Sith can be from lack of exposure to the elements, but it was not scarred as it once was - as he had feared it might still be.

The hours spent in the library on Krakyn had been long and tedious. The books, gleaned from the libraries of the Jedi Enclaves before their destruction, had given him the necessary knowledge to attempt a repair more complete than the Imperial doctors had given him. So much knowledge, lost now except for the library on Krakyn: science, metaphysics, and the cloning techniques saved from destruction and held in trust for the Empire that was to come when this Empire - this laughably ineffectual Empire - was no more.

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Darth removed his gloves, and tapped the breath screen with one finger. This screen - and all the attendant paraphernalia - had been necessary once. Then he had studied the writings of the greatest of beings; and doubt, mingled with hope, had crept into his mind. He was the single most powerful being in the galaxy, and that power could make him breathe without the need for this armor casing. If he but willed it, he could live without the artificial stimulation he had relied on for so long. Ignoring the doubts, the "but what if it doesn't work" that had crept into his mind, he steadied himself, concentrating on his purpose as his master had taught him. One hand went to the catch on the breathscreen, his eyes fastened to the mirror where his face would be reflected. Could he breathe? Would he be, as he hoped, healed - normal? Or would he be as he had always been since the "accident": scarred enough to turn the stomach of a professional medical man? The catch of the screen unfastened; Darth forced himself to stare at the mirror. Taking a deep breath, he pulled the screen away...

The healing was complete, at last. Darth stared, fascinated by his reflection, breathing for the first time in years without aid. Forcing his repaired muscles to move to his command, Darth spent several minutes testing his breathing ability. Satisfied, he looked back into the mirror. The light danced off pale skin that was only slightly marred by scars. He would pass for normal; many Sith spacers had worse scars than that to show for their other-worldly adventures. The scars even served a purpose: they gave a rugged countenance to a man who would otherwise be unhandily beautiful.

Darth allowed himself a smile, and was surprised at the warmth it brought to his face. For a moment more, he stared, fascinated, as he tried out expressions he had not seen in fifteen years. Then he grew serious again.

He crossed to the door, and checked the lock. It was, had been, locked securely from the inside. The guards were gone, as he had instructed earlier, and would not return until dawn. The privacy of his domain secured, he turned back to the mirror,

loosened the cloak he wore over the armor, and dropped it to the floor. The chestplate - armor and equipment for his breathing system - came off next, and he placed them gently on the nearby bed. Holding his breath, Darth tried to follow it consciously, and found that in these short few minutes, he had already turned his breathing over to his unconscious mind. It was going well - steady, slowly, with no major effort.

The quilted tunic came off next. Once it had been necessary padding for the equipment. Now, with the new muscle development, it was tight and uncomfortable. Tugging it off over his head, he threw it on the bed, and turned, bare to the waist, to study his reflection in the mirror once again. A frown settled into his expression as he studied the chest scars. Well, they weren't really important right now since he would be dressed.

Hands on hips, Vader allowed himself another smile. Maybe, if the right opportunity came along...

Shaking his head in a dismissing gesture, he turned his attention back to the mirror and flexed his arms. The Jedi science coupled with modified cloning techniques had worked well on the organic parts of his body, but the mechanical parts... He made a series of movements and watched critically. Well, if they were covered, no one would notice. Many spacers, too, had artificial arms, legs, or sometimes both. The synthetic skin looked real enough, and the hands were normal-looking and functional. It was the elbow and shoulder joints that didn't work quite right. Making a mental note to see about having that corrected, Vader turned to a trunk in the niche in the wall and lifted the lid. Inside were several suits of clothing he had made recently. Unlike his usual attire, they were not black, but subtle blends of dark reds and blues. The trousers he chose were soft and tailored in a deep red wine; the tunic, in a cut currently popular with his soldiery, was a background of midnight blue with the wine red in a flowing pattern through it. A dark blue cape with hood, like the one he normally wore over his armor, completed the outfit, along with his usual black boots. He tossed the clothes on the bed, next to the armor.

Stripping completely now, the Sith Lord looked in the mirror critically. The scars weren't unreasonable; one on his abdomen was particularly bad, and he made a note to work on that; it was organic. The rest, also organic, was passable, even in critical circles. Darth smiled as he dressed, then turned back to the mirror. He was pleased by what he saw.

The man who looked at Darth from the mirror was a study in subtle undercurrents. Even his garnet eyes picked up the wine and blues, making them a liquid deep violet. The outfit, Darth decided, was appropriate to one of his class and standing. Perhaps a wealthy mercenary? With a wry smile, he reached for his helmet, and stopped. He couldn't wear that; but he would certainly feel unprotected without it! Still, how would he explain... Explain? Could he truly talk, or was that breathy sound that issued from the breathscreen the best he was capable of?

Clearing his throat, Darth spoke a few words to the walls. The echoes came back at him from the vaulted ceiling, a bit gritty, but intelligible, and mellow in tone. And with practice...He shrugged, enjoying the freedom of the soft tunic. He had never wanted to be a great orator anyhow.

Walking out of the mirror's range, Darth readied himself like an actor, and crossed in front of the mirror, watching himself in the reflection. What a marvelous joke on his subjects! To go to a tavern, perhaps, and talk to all kinds of people, to wander the streets and be just one more Sith and then, in the morning, when they saw him and realized who it was they had talked to...

Darth actually laughed, and the echoes joined in. All these years they had believed him to be some kind of monster -- inhuman. And now, when they saw him...

Of course it was normal for a Dark Lord to be feared. But to win them by cunning, to make them fear him more by being like them in body, to emphasize the greatness of his mind and powers...

Belting on the lightsaber, Darth studied reflections with a critical eye. Surely no one would recognize him after fifteen years. His eyes came to rest on the lightsaber, and a doubt entered his mind. No Sith save one would carry a lightsaber. Best to leave it behind. Anger crossed Darth's face, and a pout of defiance. It was a symbol of what he was; it was his right to carry it. It would not be left behind! Pulling the cloak around him, he belted it in the front, with the lightsaber hidden underneath. No sign of a weapon now; he was just an ordinary person, nothing special.

Darth checked the room again. Satisfied, he opened a private door and descended the stone stairs into darkness. The door closed silently behind him.

Arazkhat had been the city home of the ruling Sith for time uncounted. It sprawled, crowded and dirty, from the feet of lava mountains to the tideline of a murky ocean. The narrow, alley-like streets twisted in bizarre patterns as they wound through the city toward the spaceport which was the lifeline of the dying planet of Xet.

The spaceport itself was modern, but already reeked of decay like the city it bordered. Even the twin moons of Xet gave little softness to the planet which was well into what promised to be its final ice age.

Darth, Sith-bred, took no notice of the littered streets as he crossed the city by its ancient and unused wharves until turning, at last, back toward the mountains. The slick, grey rain of early evening had stopped, but the clouds still hung threateningly over the somber landscape. Puddles remained, and Vader's cloak was wet at the edges by the time he reached the area of the city that bordered the port.

Taverns. Looking around, Darth could see several of them. Leaning against a mouldering wall, he sent his mind ranging backward in time. Taverns.

He remembered several taverns on another world, a world that was closed to him now, had been since he betrayed the Jedi. Taverns where, as a young Jedi, he had spent leisure time with his fellow students; he could not call them friends. Shrugging off the thought, he reflected that taverns had always been a problem for him. His first fight had been in a tavern, a fight over Kenobi's ten year old niece.

*How old is Emme now? Twenty-nine or thirty? And married to some farmer no doubt. I could have made her a queen. A Jedi from the greatest stock, Queen of the Sith. A fitting mate for me.* Darth growled softly to himself. This was no night for dreams of the past.

Kerim came into his mind. Darth had met Kerim in a tavern, too. That was one of the good things. The young Vessan was a master swordsman, and a good friend. The Sith blood that made Darth bigger and stronger than his companions at the Enclave was a good edge, and necessary against a talented and cunning fighter like Kerim. Their friendship had begun with a fun match, a match that had nearly cost Darth his life.

That brought another memory to mind, and Vader felt his blood begin to boil. *Naom. That bitch!* He had made her pay for Kerim's death! A grim smile touched his lips. Naom, the master Jedi, Alderaan's weapons-master and Obi-wan's lieutenant. She had never accepted him, had slighted and embarrassed him and, because *he* was untouchable, she had sent his friends to their deaths. But she had paid, had died a dirty and fitting death at his hands. If only he could make her die more than once...Vader shrugged mentally. That, unfortunately, was not one of his many talents.

The tavern a little further on across the alley was named by a sign too dingy to read, and the windows were covered with dirty cap-rock. Still, the light streaming into the alley looked warm and inviting, and Darth could hear the music and laughter through the partly open door. As he drew closer, he found he could read the sign: The Viper's Nest. He smiled to himself. *It certainly looks like one.*

Pulling his hood closer so that shadows covered his face, Vader paused at the doorway. Once inside and seated, he could drop the hood; even from where he stood, he could see that the shadows were thick and that this was a place where patrons valued their anonymity. And the odds were slight that there would be outworlders here who could recognize him, especially after fifteen years. Some, he knew, would have his face burned into their memory by the devastation of the Alderaan Enclave, even if they thought him dead. With a shrug - a gesture he seemed to have adopted only in last few hours - he stepped inside, pulling the door shut behind him.

If the shadows were thick, so was the air. Smells of smoke, of inebriants and various types of drugs, hung heavily; where the air outside had been perpetually chill, this air was warm and stale. No one even looked up at the tall, dark man in a long blue cloak who crossed to an empty table in a corner near the bar. He motioned to one of the

serving girls, gave his order, then watched with interest as she walked away from him. She had the figure for her calling, although her face wasn't to his taste. Thinking of women brought his thoughts back to Emme. He honestly hadn't thought of her for years, but tonight old memories demanded his attention. A precocious child, talented in the Jedi ways and in love with various forms of dance, she had become a beady-dancer of note from the rumors he had heard. And the Empire (at his urging) had decided she was no threat. In fact, she had been commissioned once -- *14 years ago already?* -- to dance for the Councillor Triumverate of the Hoh systems. Even Tarkin had been impressed -- *of course Tarkin never knew who she really was...*

Shaking his head, Vader suppressed the memories. It was not wise to be too sure of his position, not here where any man could be an enemy. Even if -- especially if -- they knew his identity. Ruefully, Darth realized how unprotected he felt without his armor and guards.

As the dreams of the distant past receded into the shadowed hollows of his mind, Vader saw the serving maid coming toward him. He found himself listening to the conversations and watching the people around him with a new kind of detached perception. He smiled as he took the glass she offered him, and offered her a seat. She accepted.

"You are new here," she said in a tone that did not ask for more information than he was willing to give.

"I am off-world much, and I have little time for fun."

"Be sure you are welcome here, any time." The girl smiled with an appealing shyness, and slid off the bench. "Just call if there is anything you need."

Vader watched her, noting the way she moved through the crowded room as if it were her element, like a fish in water. There were other women, too, pretty ones and plain, keeping company with the ground crews, traders, pilots and other assorted people from the spaceport. There seemed to be a large number of off-worlders here; whether because of the season or because the place was not popular with locals, Vader couldn't guess.

The bar group was a different type of crowd: noisier and jollier than the table patrons. Darth found his attention wandering to them. The bartender was large, even for a Sith. He took small jokes and comments with a rare good humor, but Darth noticed he only had to fix carousers with a baleful stare and they subsided immediately. Perhaps noticing the attention, the bartender looked toward Darth, who raised his glass slightly in salute and downed his drink. A warm smile flashed from the man, and a moment later one of the prettiest girls stopped at his table with a pitcher of his drink.

"From my father," she offered in a husky voice.

Darth smiled, looking appreciatively at her well-displayed charms.

"My thanks." He indicated the bench beside him. "And you are...?"

"Lewia, your humble servant, Lord." She sat down on the bench next to him, the contact bringing a warmth to his skin.

"We don't get many of the wealthy class here any more..." she ventured.

"Why?" Darth asked, interested. "I've been away a long time," he added by way of explanation.

"Four repyears back, one of the outworlders from the port got in a fight with one of Lord Vader's guards," she pouted prettily. "These outworlders are hard enough to handle without a *Sith* starting something."

"Hmnn," Vader nodded, "I can see where that would be a problem."

"It wasn't our fault, really. But Father couldn't stop the fighting before several people were killed. Two of them were guards from the Keep. Now we're watched, and our taxes raised..." She shifted on the seat and looked imploringly at Darth.

"That would make business rougher for you. Taverns are everywhere in Arazkhat; one can always go elsewhere."

"Being a spacer would be fun," she changed the subject. The split-skirt, bare feet and bawdy-house atmosphere of a downport tavern was all the life she was likely to know, but she had an imagination.

"It is a lot of work. Bad hours, dangerous situations...I sometimes tire of it, but it is never boring."

Another danger entered his mind, and he poured another drink while considering the possibilities. *Is this a trap? Does this woman want my money? Has someone here recognized me?* His well-made clothes were indiscreet for this part of town and the likeliest lure for a space-worn traveler with no ties would be...

"Best get back to your work. We want no trouble here, from the patrons or from your father." The girl was well-trained; she knew when she'd been dismissed.

"I hope you do us the honor of returning." She rose gracefully. Darth looked her over with what he hoped was a thinly veiled leer.

"I can hardly wait to try the specialties of the house."

Lewia smiled radiantly and turned away, making her way toward the bar. "Simple-minded tricks," Vader muttered, looking at the pitcher. It was half-empty. He poured another drink.

Settling back in the corner, he studied the crowd at the bar again. One of the men was arguing with another and, turning toward them, Vader could hear the conversation without appearing to eaves-

drop.

"It *is* him, I tell you. I couldn't forget him, not in a mill--"

"Aw, shut up. You're drunk. You're always drunk."

"But it IS--"

"Kima, you sot, he's dead. Been dead..."

"No. I tell you, I *did* know him. It is him. He's--"

The bartender scowled at the pair for raising their voices and went over to them. "What's going on? You'll have the guard in here."

"Just Kima. He's drunk already," one man said. Vader tried to place him, but couldn't remember having seen him before. The square jaw, light-colored hair and heavy build marked him as a spacer; no native Xet race looked like that, and no mixture produced a light-haired offspring. The name of the other man rang a bell though. Kima. Where had he heard that name?

"I know what I know," Kima protested stubbornly. "Knew him on Alderaan; went to school with him. I should know."

The man was baby-faced and balding, with a once-muscled stomach going flabby. Vader searched his memory. *Alderaan? Kima? From the Enclave?* His enjoyment of the evening evaporated rapidly. This was folly. And all three men were looking his way. He should leave.

"Kima, you fool, you'll embarrass the gentleman with your foolish nonsense." The bartender sounded calm, but the warning was evident.

"But I tell you..." Kima looked at his companion, who looked away in disgust. Shrugging, Kima downed his drink and poured another. "Well, I should know," he mumbled sullenly. He downed that drink and poured once more, and then again. The talk was not resumed; the room came back up to its previous noise level. Darth sat thinking about Alderaan. *Who is Kima?*

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Kima had been a student at the Enclave when Darth arrived there. One of the youngsters who frequented the Trader's Demise, a favorite Alderaani tavern, Kima had been one of the crowd the day Darth drew his lightsaber on Reyo. Darth had been called home shortly after that, and when he later returned to Alderaan, he was told that Kima had gone back to Chemira, his home planet, because of family problems.

It was luck that had brought Vader further information about Kima; once a student left the Enclave, he was pretty much forgotten. Darth was handling dispatches one day when a list of Jedi casualties crossed his desk. The name of Kima's intended, a lady of cross-planet stock and a good student in the lesser Jedi sciences, was listed.

Her mission had been one of those routine patrol flights ordered by Naom, a guard against surprise attacks on the Jedi-associated worlds.

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Glancing back at Kima, Darth pulled his hood up. Time to go. Throwing a handful of small coins on the table, he left the tavern. Kima, deep in his cups now, did not notice.

Outside, the wind had picked up and it whipped down the narrow streets like a gale. The sky was lightening; it was near dawn. The tavern would close down soon for the short time it would take to clean and restock. The spaceport began to bustle near dawn, and the customers would be demanding breakfast soon.

The cold air had cleared his head somewhat, and Darth started to mentally readjust his metabolism to clear the alcohol from his system. In doing so, he found that he was warmer than he had thought he would be.

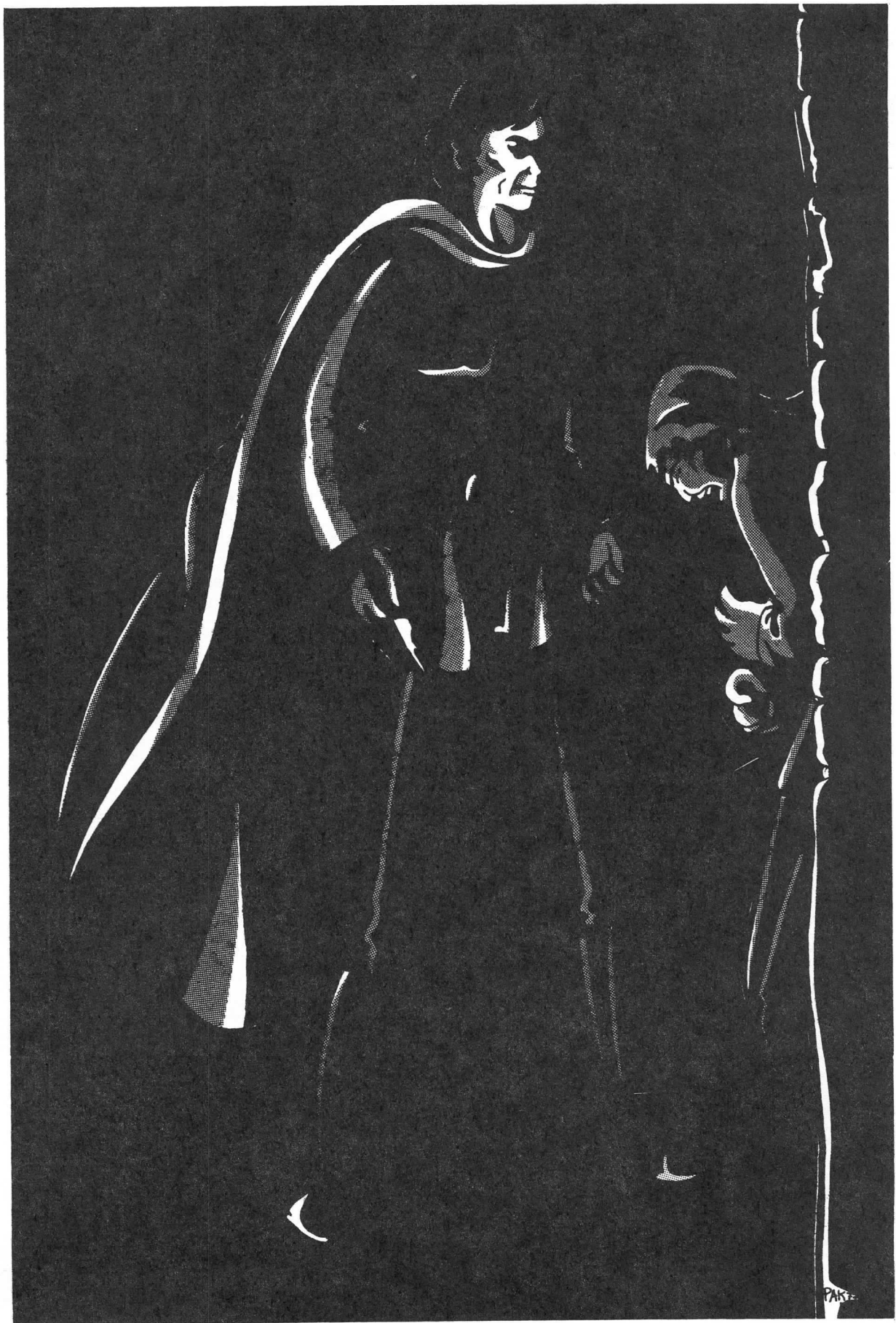
Darth found a spot in deep shadows near the doorway, and leaned against the wall. *I shall not have long to wait.*

A hatred of people began forming inside him, growing with alarming speed. *Lewia. All she'd wanted, no matter what she'd said, was his money - or his life. Portside taverns abound with women like that, women whose beauty and skill lure the unwary into dangerous situations. And Kima. Just like one of the Jedi to ruin his evening. Will my life always be plagued by these petty ineffectuals meddling in the affairs of greater people?* All he asked was to be left alone, allowed to be himself; and these dolts were meddling, snooping, believing that they were a match for him! Kima would die for it. Like others before and others to come. Darth would brook no affront to his sovereignty. By what right did even a Jedi challenge him, the master of the Force?!

There was enough light now for Darth to see that people were beginning to leave the tavern. Many walked in pairs, some singly. One group, noisier than the others, passed by without seeing him. Darth waited patiently; he had no choice. Kima was a drunkard, and no one had believed him. Yet, if he said the same thing when he was sober, perhaps someone *would* believe. Then they would know that he did not need the armor to survive; they would know that he was not the monster they believed him to be. At that moment, Darth realized that he did not intend to let his healing be known. Before he had time to think about it further, Kima appeared, weaving drunkenly along the wall.

"Kima? Come here." It was the voice of a friend, and Kima desperately needed a friend. Darth could see the lightsaber hanging from his belt, but Kima made no move toward it. "Kima, my friend, I thought it was you." Darth stepped into the light and the drunk's eyes grew wide. "Let's talk."

"It is you!" Kima grinned stupidly. "I told Hunjr it was you, but he said I drank too much. He



always says that." Kima advanced a few steps toward Darth. "I thought you were at Alderaan - that you were there when..."

"I was gone then, my friend. I had business here to attend to. But many died there, I understand. I wish I could have stopped it."

Darth watched the man closely. Kima was too drunk to know what danger he was in. The lightsaber would be a clean death for this Jedi, broken though he was. As Darth reached toward his lightsaber, he stopped, cursing to himself. On Xet, only one man would use a lightsaber! He could not risk discovery. No, this Jedi would have to die like an alley-scavenger. Shrugging mentally, Darth moved closer to him.

"I heard about Diena," he sounded concerned. "Did Naom send her on that patrol?" Kima nodded and began to cry, clutching at Darth's arm.

With his free hand, Darth slipped the wide-bladed trader's knife from Kima's belt; the crying man did not notice.

"Will it help if I tell you that Naom is dead?" Darth asked mildly. Kima shook his head, whether to clear it or to answer Vader couldn't tell, so he went on. "I killed her - because she had taken so many good lives; because she hated me for no reason; because of all the horrible suffering she caused all of us. She died, slowly and painfully, and I would do it again if I could."

Darth looked down at the man who held onto him for support. Kima was numb with wine, his eyes blurred by tears. He was with a friend, one he trusted. He felt nothing as the knife flashed through him.

Darth shook his arm free; Kima stood, back against the dirty wall, watching in fascinated horror as his insides oozed from the slash across his body. No cry escaped him, but he turned confused, dog-like eyes on Darth. Then, losing his balance, he slid into a puddle and lay there, choking on filth as his life drained away.

Vader was intent upon his own thoughts and feelings. This man was nothing; his trust was nothing. But the Dark Lord had a problem of his own to solve. Bending over gracefully, he slipped the lightsaber from Kima's belt, and gave his victim a final salute. With a swirl of his cloak, he disappeared down the deserted alley.

Kima struggled in the pool, unable to raise himself. His attempts to call out were drowned in a choking hiss until, finally, he lay still.

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Darth barely noticed his surroundings as he strode quickly and purposefully toward the keep. The sun was barely over the mountains now, and in a few hours people would be getting on with the day's business. He took the stone stairs in the passageway three at a time, and slammed the door behind him as he stepped into his room.

The lights seemed less bright than before, and Vader glowered into the mirror. Far from being an enjoyable evening, his sojourn into the city had exposed him dangerously, and proved once and for all that the humanoid races were dull, self-centered, and totally beneath the notice of one such as himself. What had this evening done for him? *Nothing*, he admitted to himself, *nothing at all*. Any idea that he could join - rejoin - the humanoid races as a participant...Time to put those ideas out of his head forever. Unless he should someday meet someone of his own stature, he was alone and would remain alone as only the mightiest of the gods can be. Humanoids were puny, weak and stupid. They could be used, but never trusted. He must remain alone or he would be tainted by their shortcomings.

The breathscreen lay where he had left it, as did the rest of his armor. Darth rummaged in a drawer for a small tool kit, then sat on the edge of his bed, spreading the tools before him. Short moments later it was done. Some of the insides of the chestplate lay on the floor, while the shell, lighter now, remained in Vader's hands.

The breathscreen was harder to adjust. Leaving in the filters to muffle his voice, he tried several combinations to get just the right effect when he breathed in and out. Nodding, he removed the breathscreen from his face once more. It would take sharp ears to know that the breath whistling through the filter screens was not forced by a mechanical pump.

Smiling broadly, he lowered both shells to the carpeted floor and collected the fragments of the insides. They disappeared into a secret compartment in one wall as if they had never existed.

Taking up Kima's lightsaber, he opened a case fitted cunningly into his wardrobe. Inside, in a neat row, lay the lightsabers taken from Jedi vanquished in the past. His bare fingers trailed over them while he recalled the owners to mind. His fingers lingered on one in particular, the old, old lightsaber that had belonged to the Jedi Naom. Then he fitted Kima's saber into an empty place, and counted the remaining ones. Six empty slots, each a battle that he looked forward to. Satinka Istaris' Jranikan lightsaber would someday rest here, as would Obi-wan Kenobi's. It was merely a matter of time until not even his old master could stand against him - if he could now. And who else would there be?

Darth closed the case gently. *Time will bring the remaining Jedi to me. One at a time.*

As he turned away from the wardrobe, he pulled the stained cloak from his shoulders and threw it in a corner. It would be his secret, then; let people think him an invalid, kept alive by mechanical aides, dependent upon them forever. What a surprise for them should they decide to attack him that way! Stripping off the bloodstained shirt, his thoughts continued. *The mask inspires terror, even in seasoned troops like the Stormtroopers that Tarkin's so proud of. Tarkin!* Darth scowled. Tarkin understood control by terror, especially since he became governor of the outlying Imperial territories. But even he would have no idea...

Darth looked at the mirror thoughtfully, frowning. The wolf had been busy of late with his plans. Still, he was useful in his own way, with plans like this Death Star he was having built. *He must do it without the Emperor's help, of course. The Emperor is weak, but not a fool. He will not allow Tarkin such power untended by his personal officers. Yet, Tarkin can do it. Then I will make my move.* Yes, Tarkin would bear watching.

Checking the door again, Darth heard the morning guards moving to their posts, right on time. They, too, feared their armored leader; they would serve him well. Crossing back to the bed, Darth sat on the edge and kicked off his boots. The

breathscreen stared back at him from the chest-top where he had placed it. It was useful after all.

Stripping completely now, Darth relaxed all his muscles. What a night this had been. Freedom - in his own quarters, at least - at last!

Below the keep, the sounds of morning were mingled with the whine of a freighter-class craft hurtling spaceward. The feel of the velvet cover of the bed was exquisite, and Darth allowed himself to be seduced. Stretching full length on the bed, he wallowed in the luxury of the softness against all of his skin for the first time in fifteen years. Soon he was fast asleep.



# RELIGION AMONG THE TREK

***ANN POPPLESTONE***

The Trek are a difficult to classify and, therefore, fascinating society. Their religion is no more typical than any other aspect of their culture and requires a great deal of space to discuss with any degree of thoroughness. However, until a more complete discussion can adequately be prepared, this brief summary is offered for the purpose of illuminating a number of points brought up in other monographs.

The Trek have a high God named Rober that sometimes manifests himself as a human figure and sometimes as a large, brightly colored bird. He is believed to have created the world and the first and second level Lower Gods. Legend has it that control of the universe was wrested from Rober by two rival gods named Enbee and Param. However, prophecy has it, that as soon as all of the Lower Gods can settle their arguments and unite behind Rober, the present stalemate will be abolished and Rober will again control the Earth and the Heavens. The prophecy, like most, is not very definite about when this unity and resumption of control will occur, but the diviners claim that it will be in the near future.

There are three first level Lower Gods. Sha'ner, the first of the three, is always called on to witness contracts and promises of all types. Those who are believed to have broken an agreement are tried before one of this God's priests.

Moy-nim, the second, is the patron of scholars and those searching for knowledge. He is also believed to be the special guardian of those who are trying to establish an identity and is invoked during naming ceremonies.

De'Kel, the third of the first level Lower Gods, is the patron of healers. Those Treek who undertake this profession see him as a jealous god and can often be heard refusing to assist someone engaged in a task special to another God by saying "I serve De'Kel, not..." whatever.

The number three has a great deal of significance to the Treek and recurs regularly in their religious beliefs. There are three levels of Gods, and the lower two each contain three.

The three second level Lower Gods are Font, the god of the family; Tak, the guardian of travelers and of crops; and Doo, the patron of craftsmen.

In addition to these Gods, there are a large number of lower spirits. These are believed to have been created by some or all of the Gods. There is considerable variation among the Treek in their perception of the spirits, a variation that is not, generally, present as far as the Gods are concerned. These spirits are held to be much more concerned with the day to day activities of the Treek than are any of the Gods.

Le'Dod is important to the more conservative of the Treek and is held by them to be the guardian of decorum and civility. On the other hand, Icth is held in greater esteem by the more reform-minded who hold that the controls handed down by Le'Dod have outlived their usefulness. Icth is thought to punish those who are not honest with one another, especially within a family.

Ten'bur is said to regulate the seasons and cycles of all sorts.

Pasmit is often blamed when an act of personal violence or aggression has occurred.

Sharem is the guardian of those of faith and piety while Le-lik is the guardian of children.

Ger-Dow is held to be responsible for the Aurora Borealis or northern lights.

In addition to these Gods and spirits, there are a number of "borrowed" Gods. Many of these are from the geographically close and culturally similar Sefan. Among these is Ellin. Both groups regard this God as angry and easily offended. His name is often invoked for curses.

Gord is the God of war but is held to swiftly abandon any soldier who does not behave in an honorable and dutiful manner. He is also the patron of brewers.

Clem's oracles are often consulted for explanations. Oddly, the answers from these oracles are said to come from Mov occasionally. This good-humored God is also the patron of scribes and printers.

Ur'gon is held by the Treek to be the patron of play and marriage. He is more important to the Sefan, however, and like the others has broader associations for the Sefan.

Two other Gods are also present. They are apparently from outside, but both are regarded more as curiosities than objects of worship to most of the Treek. This investigator was unable to determine the actual origin of these two.

The first is Gor'lu. He is a high Creator-god, generally regarded as much weaker than Rober. Possibly he is a weaker version of the Treek God that diffused outside the society and has not diffused back. He is held to confer and, to somewhat control, a mana-like agency.

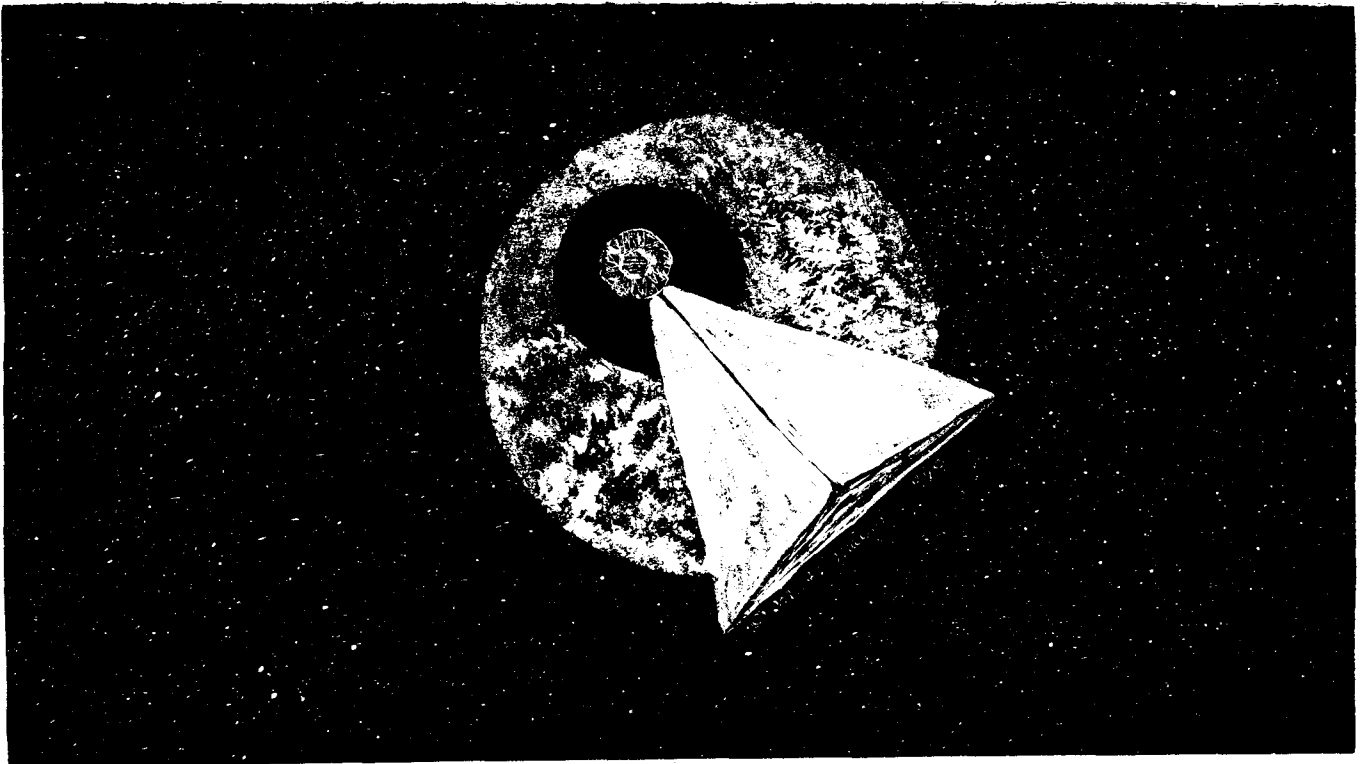
Weaker still is Spelb who is a guardian of travelers and visitors.

The Treek communicate with the spirits and even with distant members of their own society by means of a number of devices.

The principal one is a Poff box. Inscribed messages left in such a box are believed to be carried to their destination by a blue eagle-like creature. It has to be appeased by means of symbols affixed to the message itself. Lately, this investigator was told the poff boxes have been demanding more and more costly symbols in return for their services. Although the Treek claim to be complying, and complain lucidly about it, the poff boxes are continuing to be unreliable. Curses seem to be ineffective, as well.

Tephons are used as well as poff boxes, but can only transmit brief messages.

In conclusion, the Treek are a complex, but durable culture and have been most successful in resisting outside pressures that have forced acculturation on some of their neighbors. They warrant more study than they have received up until this time.



# NIGHT WINE

## Cheryl D. Rice

The sky had never been so blue, the air so sweet, the sunlight so pure as it laid long shimmering fingers across the ground. It was the perfect morning of a lifetime.

The boy leaned out of the open window to look down on the yard below. Every separate blade of dewed grass sparkled up at him like a field of spiky emeralds. He took a deep breath and held it until he thought his lungs would burst. Releasing it in a gusty sigh, he drew in his head. What a glorious day this was going to be!

"Say...sleepy head. The day's half gone. Get down here for breakfast." The familiar tones of his father jerked his attention back to the present.

"Be right there." The child peeled off his pajamas and dove into a pair of much abused jeans and a light-weight shirt decorated on the front with some lettering about a fair and the faded picture of a horse. He slid his feet into scuffed boots and was half-way out the door before remembering he hadn't bothered to wash. Well, no time for that...not on a day like this one promised to be. Besides, he had plans that would, with a little luck, include getting thoroughly dirty. His feet clattered down the carpeted steps and he raced through the currently empty front part of the house and slid into his seat at the kitchen table.

His father looked up from his breakfast in mild irritation. "About time you got here."

The boy shrugged, swallowing ham and scrambled

eggs in large gulps. "I know...I was thinking."

"Day-dreaming's more like it. Now eat up. There are some chores I want you to help me get out of the way before your mother gets back from town."

"Aw Dad...I was gonna..."

"Never mind what you were 'gonna'. You'll be helping me this morning. If we get done there'll be time for you to go off on your own after lunch."

The boy accepted his fate with a minimum of grumbling since he knew from past experience it would be to no avail. The morning hours passed in a kind of blur as he helped fix a rusty pump, fed chickens and aided in starting a recalcitrant auto-plow.

After a late lunch of sandwiches, he reminded his father that he had plans of his own.

"All right. Guess I'm done with you for a while. Look...why don't you take Merit if you think you can be careful. She hasn't been getting nearly enough exercise since your brother went off to school."

The boy, delighted, dashed off to the stables. This was even better than he had planned. He could see the chestnut mare watching him with her large, intelligent eyes as he ran toward her. So many times he had wanted to ride the beautiful animal, only to be told he was too young.

Quicker than thought, he had her bridled, saddled and was leading her out into the almost smothering heat of the farm yard. The child could feel rather than see, his father watching him from the cool sanctuary of the house.

With what he hoped was nonchalant grace, he swung himself up onto the horse's back and gathered the reins carefully. Now the only problem was... where to go?

He turned Merit's head in the direction of the ridge of hills that half encircled the farm. That was as good a place to start as any.

The mare danced, skittishly at first, but he soon settled her down and they headed at a steady canter toward the tree-covered slopes that lay ahead, blued by distance.

The horse's excess energy soon evaporated in the stifling heat. Both she and her rider were relieved to finally reach a wide but shallow stream bordered by ancient trees that cast a welcome shade.

Merit waded in and delicately bent her lovely head to drink. The boy wiggled into a more comfortable position in the saddle and sniffed the air. The heat was, if anything, more oppressive although the sun had hidden itself behind a bank of heavy clouds. The wind was beginning to rise, and there was a hint of rain in the distance. He briefly considered turning for home, but it seemed such a waste of opportunity. Better to go on for a while.

The mare had drunk enough so he urged her on. They happily splashed across the languidly flowing stream, sending up blossoms of spray.

The two traveled on as the ground began to rise before them. The boy was lost in the experience, conscious only of sheer exhilaration and the joy of each passing moment.

Somehow, before he knew it, they were in the hills, Merit picking her way carefully along a dusty trail that was littered with fist-sized stones. He looked around in surprise not unmixed with dismay. The trail was not only unpromising, it was totally unknown to him. He had no clear idea of how they had arrived there. He reined in the mare to a jerky stop and stood in the stirrups to see if there were any familiar landmarks around. There weren't.

To make matters even worse, the sky was now rapidly darkening, the sun lurking somewhere behind clouds the color of old pewter. Thunder muttered and grumbled nearby and a flock of small birds fluttered by in a flurry of wing-rush as if hurrying for a place of safety.

He suddenly wished that he were home. Then the practical side of his nature asserted itself. All he had to do was turn Merit around and head back.

Unfortunately, the trail was quite narrow at the point he now found himself and he was riding

a good-sized animal who, to make matters worse, was now becoming increasingly unsettled by the approaching storm. As the first heavy raindrops began to pelt them, and forked lightning wrote itself with a flourish across the sky, the mare unexpectedly reared. The surprised boy fell off, landing with a thud in the rocky path.

Slightly stunned, he lay for a moment in blank dismay watching her gallop down the path. Picking himself up he started after her. Several pains were competing for his attention, but since none seemed serious, he decided to ignore them until more time presented itself. He called to the horse, but the words were ripped away by the rising wind and rain.

On he trudged through the half-dark, along the path that was rapidly turning into a deep and affectionate glue. The storm was now raging with full fury. His fears for his horse were giving way to more basic ones about his own safety.

He stumbled around a curve and almost into Merit's rump. She was standing, shivering with fright, under an outcropping of rock that loomed above the trail. He gratefully huddled against her side, coated with sticky mud, stroking her neck until finally the clouds moved on and the animal quieted.

With a groan he re-mounted, and the soggy two-some set out for home. With some effort they made their way down the path and across the now swollen stream. It was almost dark before he could see the lights of home in the valley below.

He reined in Merit, enjoying the scene it made. Though not usually possessed of a contemplative nature, he could not help but appreciate beauty when it was laid out so lavishly before him.

The storm had cleared the air and it was soft and clear. The house lights were sprinkling the blue evening dusk with their yellow glow, a picture to hold fast in memory for a lifetime.

The boy urged on the tired horse, suddenly aware of how happy he was to have a safe haven. His hands stung from the rubbing of the reins on scraped skin and he ached deep in his bones from the fall. To be home...to be safe...to be taken care of...

But a part of him stopped the horse short of his goal. He looked around. One of the oak trees had made a catch of stars in its branches. He looked up. Other stars twinkled cheerily, mysteriously, down at him.

On impulse he turned Merit around and took off at a gallop across an open field, dangerous though it was in the almost complete darkness. Better to be free - nothing was more important.

He rode on like a man with the Furies at his back...heedless of all else. To be free was all, to be free, be free, free, free, free, free...

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The watchers broke off the show with what in a human might be called exasperation.

*//I told you before...he continues to replay that.//*

*//With all respect, you are telling me nothing new. I have tried to guide his thoughts to different channels, but it is very difficult. He is a very strong-willed individual.//*

The two wizened figures glared at the source of their frustration, and turned to each other.

*//I must tell you, the fractionally younger figure insisted, that we are not happy with the results you have achieved. A boy and a horse... was it for this we went to all the trouble...//*

The other mentally waved him to a halt. *//As I have insisted time and again, he will be a better subject once he works out the feelings for himself. This confinement is torture to him. I have tried suggesting other scenarios, but the results are equally unsettling.//*

*//Let me see one...an adult one for a change. All that wandering around in hills makes no sense. I've checked his conscious memory...he lived nowhere near hills when he was young.//*

The older figure, apparently lost in thought, sent out a wave of pure disdain. *//Think for a change. These are wish-dreams, not truth. For some reason he now wants hills. Here - this should be a time not too long after we first encountered him, one of the high points of his career. He should be very happy. He is to be awarded one of Star Fleet's highest honors...he is the man of the hour...//*

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The hour, he realized as he struggled to awaken, was quite a bit more advanced than it had any right to be. He had returned from the afternoon tour of the installations where he made polite small talk over some drinks while watching the local dignitaries make fools of themselves, had come to his room to change for the evening's ceremonies, and then...His big mistake, he thought ruefully, was deciding to lay down to rest for a "few minutes". In fact he had been asleep, according to the wall chronometer, for over an hour.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes in a futile attempt to fully awake. *It must be this heavy gravity, he thought wearily. On the ship I don't have any trouble waking up.*

The small bedroom was stuffy and he stumbled over his own boots as he weaved to the window and threw it open. Cool, fresh air flooded in, fluttering the curtains and clearing his senses. He leaned out, enjoying the sensation, while an obliging handful of wind ruffled his hair and caressed his cheek.

Feeling more like himself, he stretched and, for the first time, noticed the view. This backwater planet had settings of truly unearthly beauty. The hotel for Federation personnel was

perched on a steep hillside that gave out onto a vista of the river valley below and the capital city that lay on the higher hills on the other side. Now that night had fallen, the lights of evening glimmered like scales on a sleeping dragon. Buildings made indistinct and ethereal by distance seemed to flow in formal patterns which yet defied exact recognition.

He looked again at the time and told himself to stop daydreaming. He marched into the bathroom and took a good, long look at his own reflection in the small mirror over the sink. "I look," he informed his face sternly, "like Death warmed over."

The stubble of his heavy beard stained his cheeks and chin, giving him a rather rakish cast not in accord with his status. *No help for it... there's no time for a shower, but I have to shave.* He was just starting to let the water run, when he heard the door buzzer. "Come on in, Spock."

He sighed in mild irritation. Trust the Vulcan to be prompt - even early. *Here he is, dressed no doubt in a perfectly fitting dress uniform, while his captain is now attired only in his uniform pants and excess whiskers.*

Before he could become too depressed by these thoughts, an elusively familiar voice disrupted them. "Sorry, I'm not Mr. Spock. But I'd like to see you for a few minutes if I may."

The man put down his razor with a suddenly shaking hand. *It can't be....* Resisting an impulse to peek through the half-closed door, he took the few steps necessary and threw it open.

It couldn't be...but it was. She stood in the middle of his bedroom, smiling serenely as if they had parted friends shortly before rather than as bitter ex-lovers four years earlier.

He tried to say something, only to find that his tongue was not in working order. He shook himself mentally, and with a disciplined effort, he regained control. "What a pleasant surprise, Janly," he managed in someone else's voice. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Not in the least cowed by his brusque tone, she folded her arms and inspected him with her large, intelligent eyes. "You haven't changed... still the perfect captain of the perfect ship. Still in love with the *Enterprise*?"

"Still in love with what's-his-name? the poet laureate of Altair 6?"

"You know quite well. Yes, I'm Mrs. Davids Neville, and I'm still very much in love since you asked."

"Glad to hear it." The man leaned against the door frame and looked his visitor up and down, being deliberately rude.

She smiled and slowly turned around so that he could appraise her completely. "Do you like what you see?"

"It will do." He couldn't keep from smiling in return. He had never overly impressed or awed her, which in some way accounted for the fact he had loved her. And she was lovely, as usual, dressed tonight in something gold and gauzy. "Life out there seems to have agreed with you."

"Oh it does, did..." Janly stammered to a halt, for the first time appearing at a loss for words. "But that's not important. I'm here to congratulate you on your medal. Everyone who knows you is so proud."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Taking praise well had never been one of his strong points. "Don't make too much of it. We were in the right place at the right time and all that."

"That isn't what I heard. They say that since you're such a hero you are going to be kicked upstairs to some safe desk job at the Academy. Or maybe even make Fleet Captain."

He stared at her, aghast. "Oh great...four years after you walk out on me after meeting the greatest writer since Shakespeare, you walk in again to tell me I'm going to lose the *Enterprise*. You're a lot of fun, lady."

She had the grace to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't be so close and not say hello. Look, I even brought you a present." She dug through her large tote bag and pulled out a small, green bottle topped with an elaborately chased metal stopper. "Here, I hadn't seen any for ages. Remember that one shore leave when we went to the beach and drank...?"

"Yes." His tone stopped her cold. He was amazed at how vividly the memories were replaying themselves and how they clawed and stung. "Stars! Tears...I haven't had any since the last time I saw you."

Janly fingered the stopper reflectively. "I know it is awfully late to say 'I'm sorry', but I couldn't help myself. It was like one of those things you read in the old books. Once I met Davids nothing else mattered. I know it's cruel, but it's true."

"Yes, that's what you said at the time. I was always surprised that you had managed to live 29 years without him."

"I hadn't, not really," she insisted softly.

"So," he went on, trying not to hear. "How's it going? I'd like to finally meet him." The long forgotten wound was ripping open farther. "Is he here?"

"No...Davids is at home. He dislikes travel."

"Then why are you..." The captain broke off as he caught sight of the time. "I've got to get ready. Talk to me while I shave."

The woman followed him into the bathroom. "I'm on my way to Earth...it's so exciting!"

He raised an eyebrow inquisitively as he lathered his face.

"Don't tell me you forgot," she protested. "I received my doctorate in Earth folklore. And to actually be able to go there for further research is the opportunity of a lifetime."

The captain picked up the old-fashioned razor he preferred and carefully drew it down the plane of his left cheek. "I've never understood why you find us humans so interesting." He rinsed the blade under the running water and turned so the light fell more directly where he next wished to cut. "Compared to Vulcans, for example..."

"They're no fun." The woman's face was alight as she began to expound upon her pet interest. "Humans are so unpredictable, independent, so emotional. From the Pyramids to the stars in 6000 years without destroying yourselves. In comparison even we are so boring, so static."

He started to reply, then winced instead as the razor sliced into the soft skin above his upper lip. "Damn," he muttered as the blood dripped steadily. "Never could carry on a conversation and shave at the same time." He wiped off the remaining lather and inspected the cut. "Guess I'll live."

The captain abandoned the bathroom and made his way to his suitcase. He dug through a jumble of clothes and drew out a dress uniform shirt that had seen better days. "Sorry I've got to run, Janly, but thanks for dropping by." He was obscurely pleased that he did not sound the least bit sarcastic.

She had followed him back into the bedroom and now stood there indecisively. "How about one quick drink...for old times sake?"

"Okay." He shouldered his way into the shirt. "But I've got to get going."

She unstopped the bottle and poured two tiny glassfuls. "Here..." But before he could drink she stopped him with a motion. "First, a toast... such a unique custom. To the best Captain in the Fleet!"

He sipped the wine cautiously. Tiny lights seemed to glimmer in its depths and it was as warm/sweet as he had remembered - honeyed fire. "To the loveliest anthropologist in creation."

She smiled and they drank again.

He suddenly noticed that she was standing very near, staring at his face with tear-brimmed eyes. On impulse he set down his glass and drew her into his arms. She came willingly.

He had forgotten over the years how short she was; he had to bend low to reach her mouth. The top of her sleek head reached only to the middle of his chest. Heart-high.

Janly was as eager as he for the kiss. His mouth moved on hers in a way he had caught himself dreaming about over the years.

Finally he drew back in some surprise. In his experience, that was not the way happily married women kissed men other than their husbands. But before he could make any comment, he realized her face was smeared with blood. He drew back in instinctive distaste.

"What's wrong?" Her eyes were now huge, glowing topazes.

"Your mouth..." He gestured as she walked over to the mirror. "That cut of mine must have opened." *A most unromantic topic for discussion*, he thought.

She looked at herself with interest and made a face at her reflection. "Yes, I look like a vampire." She ran some water and wiped away the smear. "Now there's one of your race's more outlandish fables. The 'undead' who come in the night and drink your blood like wine. I've never understood the basic significance of that myth." Before the captain could comment she walked over to the open window. "Now some are so simple...only wish-fulfillment or a search for a hero who can do the things ordinary men cannot." The sight of the half-hidden towers across the valley caught her eye. "You people had enchanted places even before you left the home planet. Like the one where you never grew old and the one with the knights...Camelot. I'm sure I shall enjoy my trip."

"Why are you going alone? Why isn't your precious husband with you?" The captain was finding her blithe change of subject annoying.

Janly's light blue skin grew a shade more pale. "If you must know," she paused as if gathering her courage. "We have decided to separate...but only temporarily. I was falling so far behind in my work."

"And he," the man guessed in a flash of intuition, "has found some other lovely creature to fawn over him and worship at his shrine. Poor Janly... her great passion, all for nothing."

She had picked up her drink and gulped it down. Now she looked as if she would like to throw the empty glass at his head. "It's not for nothing. He will come to his senses."

"But it will never be the same." He still had not decided if he were going to allow himself to gloat. "What's the matter? Weren't you useful to him in his great art?"

"You don't love someone because he is useful," she snapped, setting down the glass with a bang. "You love him because," her voice trailed off as she thought for a moment. "Because of the way he makes you feel." She ran a seven-fingered hand through her dark blue hair in distraction. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have come. But there was a stop here, and when I heard about you..."

"You wanted to see if things had changed with me. I'm pretty much the same...now that I'm over you," he finished with a slightly malicious grin. "I'll smile again, but I'll never," he was suddenly deadly serious, "I'll never be young again."

She looked at him with something dangerously akin to pity. "Poor man...and all you have to love now is your ship...who can never love you back. But then I've heard that humans prefer their love to be unrequited."

"At least she won't grow tired of me," he reminded the woman. "She will never be unfaithful, never be untrue."

This time Janly turned a deep shade of anger as his taunt struck home. "How well you put that. Now I think we're even."

"Yes." He sat down on a chair near the window, absently watching a tattered moth making desperate love to the light, its gold/gauze wings in shreds. "We're even and that's the saddest thing of all."

Janly started to speak then thought better of it. Their eyes met across the room. Between them memory was strong as love had been and they understood each other more at this moment than they ever had.

Without a word she turned. He sat and looked at the floor until he heard the door close behind her...no time or a lifetime later.

Instead of hurt all he felt was an immense weariness. With a little luck he would never see her again. He rose to his feet shakily, the action of an old man. He turned to close the window and the fantastic shapes of the buildings now glowing in the light of the rising moon caught his eye.

Camelot...of all things. He had always wanted to be Arthur, now he merely pitied him. And not to understand vampires! *It isn't the blood*, he thought in mild contempt. *It is the soul the vampire takes...and after the victim is drained dry, peaceful death is still denied him.*

The captain poured another glass of wine and sipped it carefully. No use pining over what couldn't be. His life was fine as it was. He liked the solid reality of it. All dreams could do was fade.

The room was very quiet and the wine left in the bottle twinkled up at him disconsolately. *Damn her for showing up. Damn her for her style, her elegance; for threatening to hurt me. Damn her for not loving me.*

He sipped his drink again and watched the full moon rise. It was as beautiful, as alluring, as cold and sterile as his life - and blank as Modred's shield.

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The onlookers broke off contact. The younger seemed appalled. *//That was one of the high points of his life?//*

//So it appears. At least that is the way he chooses to remember it. He received many honors in his life, but not much love.//

//That word again. Humans are beyond rational

understanding.//

The figures stood in the dimly lit cavern, each lost in private thought. Then the younger resumed its complaints. //Remember it was your idea to have him brought here. The Magistrate is not pleased. All we have seen is one incomprehensible fantasy after another. What is a Pyramid or a Camelot? Where is the adventure he lived?//

The other figure mentally shrugged. //Locked up behind that wall of ruined flesh. His will is unbreakable. I have tried, I tell you. We cannot force him. If we attempt pain...in his condition he will die.//

The figures, in a slow and stately procession, glided over to where the still figure of the human was huddled.

//We had such hopes. This is such a disappointment.//

//At that you have been lucky. When he can find no dream to hide in, he radiates pure emotion. No words, pure emotion and it is rarely pleasant.//

//That still might be better than a horse ride or grief over a woman who loves someone else. I would be willing to settle for just knowing what a vampire was.//

//Enough for today. Let us return to the others. He will now sleep.//

The large-headed creatures dimmed the lights even further and had taken a few steps when a mental shout clamored through the cavern. //Wait!//

The two turned in surprised unison.

//Pyramid!// The thought was accompanied by a visualization of Earth so perfect and clear it seemed to the creatures that it took shape before them in mid-air. Earth, as the planet might look on the viewscreen of a starship, spinning serenely on her axis at the bottom of a gravity well. Blue and beautiful beyond belief, wearing her wispy halo of atmosphere. Lovely as a lost dream.

Then the scene changed and a towering shape took form...one of those that still stood along the Nile even after all the centuries. It glimmered in the pure sunlight under a sky of brilliant, aching blue.

The creatures, mystified, recognized the geometric shape but still had no idea of its purpose.

The human's mind led them within the structure; inside to a burial chamber remembered from long-ago school days. The creatures looked with interest at the painted figures of stylized men and animals that marched along the walls of what they now could see was a tomb, hidden deep among the crushing rocks.

The Keeper thought his understanding back at the human. //Clear.//

//Wait. Now a vampire.//

While the two watched, the scene changed yet again to show the coffin. Slowly the lid lifted and its inhabitant sat up...looking around in curiosity that slowly turned to dawning horror.

He stepped out and looked at himself as if inspecting his body for damage. He was the captain from the previous dream.

Slowly, then frantically, he began pacing the small room. All the while disregarding a thousand kings' ransoms in gold as he stumbled over them searching for a door.

No way out! He screamed in rising panic and started pounding on the wall for help until his hands were bloody. All the time there was a sense of someone watching just beyond the wall, watching and enjoying his terror. Silently drinking it in like wine.

Exhausted, he finally slumped to the floor, nursing his shredded hands. Rocking in despair. An inscription over one picture of Osiris, the risen god, brought the true measure of his horror home. Even though it was in hieroglyphics he could decipher it all too clearly.

YOU LIVE AGAIN
YOU LIVE FOR EVER
HERE YOU ARE YOUNG
ONCE MORE FOR EVER

Forever. In his mind the word held all the bitterness of eternity.

The scene abruptly broke off as a surge of pure hatred against the universe, the unseen watchers and Fate flooded the human's mind, blocking out all else.

The younger watcher, aghast, stepped back instinctively. //Horrible! Does he do that often?//

//More since the female died.//

//Did he care for her deeply?//

//No, not much at all. She was a very boring person, even for a human. But she was company.//

//This is so unfair. We did not force him to come here. It was his choice.//

//Perhaps he did not truly realize...// The Keeper sighed. //He was so damaged he had no other choice. A healthy one now...like that other captain. Now there is a personality for you.//

//And he hates illusion even more strongly than this one.//

//While he is young and whole, perhaps. It might be different if he were old or crippled. He might take more readily to our demands than this one.//

//But we cannot count on it.//

//No, but word of us may leak out to other humans. There are those, I believe, who have more affinity for our skills than the ones we have met.//

The Keeper mused on the idea of a colony of illusion-fed humans and something old, cold, and evil gleamed in the depths of his mind. //We may yet have a chance.//

//We shall see. But what are we going to do about this one?//

//Leave him to me. He may yet resign himself to us. Or he may die.//

//Of what? We can support his life processes far better...//

//He is filled with hate and sorrow.//

//I fail to see...//

//There are some sorrows that kill.//

The other drew himself up to his not overpowering height. //You know humans better than I, but I can see no profit in aiding one who hates us.//

//You are a fool, the Keeper noted without rancor as they stood looking at the shriveled husk of what had once been Christopher Pike. //It isn't us he hates so much as himself. For letting this happen to him, finding himself denied a clean death.//

//But humans are terrified of death. They fight it off. Even though it would have been

kinder of them to let him die than keep him alive in the prison of his own body.//

//But he was in the power of those who hold on to any shred of life even when it is the ultimate cruelty.// A trace of something like respect flickered through the Keeper's mind. //Not all humans are as wise as this one. He has found that there can be no "happily ever after" for himself. It is more fitting and braver to die when the time is right. And at that time...when the illusion he shows me is his own death, I shall give him the reality.//

Pike's tired blue eyes gazed for a moment at the Talosians' faces. They turned and left the menagerie area in the soundless elevator.

//We must find new specimens, the younger insisted.

//We can but try.//

//Tell me. Why do humans hang on to life even when it is a hell to them?//

//Because they are a very young race.//

The other thought incomprehension at him.

//They are young, the Keeper insisted. //They clutch at life and scorn death because, he explained patiently, //they still think there is a difference.//



SOLITUDE

I am alone.
This seclusion is my choice.
They say I am lonely
But my isolation is voluntary.
I need no other by my side
Nor will I allow a touch of mind or hand.
To open my barriers to contact would bring pain.
I am alone; alone I shall remain.
Perhaps, someday, one will come,
Someone to be admitted to my shell of solitude.
But until that day arrives
I will be alone.

Gene S. Delapenia

Roses

I

When you hold me near
And whisper of velvet roses
Are you holding a girl
For the sake of holding a girl,
Or are you holding ME
For Love?

II

Does one only love the things
one cannot conquer?
Is it for this reason
that I love him?
Enterprise, he is yours and
Thus unconquerable by me.
How I hate you
for I cannot subject him to me.

Wilma Fisher



—MIKE BRAUN

IN DEFEAT OF HELL

JACQUELINE BIELOWICZ

The tiny shuttlecraft was a dot in the immensity of space. Captain James T. Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*, over his pique now that he was away from the damn bureaucrats on Raynette III, relaxed in the co-pilot's seat, his fingers lightly tapping out the rhythm of the tune echoing in his head as he absently watched First Officer Spock running mathematical equations through the craft's small computer. It wasn't that he minded attending coronations, but Starfleet had ordered all of his senior officers along too, and then the *Enterprise* had had to answer a minor emergency with only a junior officer in command; it was enough to make any commander nervous. Not that Sulu wasn't competent, especially with Uhura to back him, but dammit all, they could have left *one* senior officer aboard.

Behind him, he could hear Chekov telling McCoy and Scotty all about his leave on Earth; they had been able to pick him up on Raynette III for the last stage of his return to duty. The communications console chattered into life, "*Enterprise* to Shuttlecraft *Barlow*."

Kirk casually punched a button. "This is Kirk. Go ahead, *Enterprise*."

"Uhura here, sir. Welcome back. The *Enterprise* will rendezvous with you in 22.8 minutes."

"Very well, Lieutenant. How is everything?"

Sulu cut in. "Fine, Captain. Mission accomplished with no problem. How was the coronation?"

"Boring, like most diplomatic functions. But there was this bar..."

Suddenly, all hell seemed to break loose. Warning buzzers sounded, red emergency lights flashed on several panels, and both Kirk and Spock jerked to attention, scanning rapidly for the trouble.

"Captain..." Spock barked, and pointed to one conspicuously dark panel. He whirled around and leaped from his chair, but he had moved only two steps when a massive explosion ripped forward from the engine area. Kirk felt rather than saw the shuttlecraft tear apart at the seams. He saw the rest of the crew thrown forward, instantly bleeding. He felt his lungs burst and fill with fluid in the suddenly airless cabin. As the red haze of his own blood clouded his eyes, he heard Sulu's voice, like a shrill, broken computer: "Sh...c...ft...mi..."

Five frozen bodies floated away from the wreckage, impelled by the force of the explosion. Silence reigned in the dark void.

"I tell you, Talar, there is going to be trouble when He finds out about this mistake. You just mark my words. Defecation will definitely hit the ventilation. I'm glad that I'm not the one who has to tell Him."

"Don't worry about it, Josiah. Peter has

already gone to tell Him. And kindly watch your expressions. You know how they bother the fundamentalists."

Kirk lay in the warmth, drowsily listening to the two bickering voices. He felt safe and secure and...Memory hit him and his eyes flew open. *What the hell...?*

He was lying in a room with muted grey walls that seemed to be shifting in density. He saw the rest of his crew lying on what appeared to be stone slabs. Two beings were bent over McCoy: one an Andorian military guard and the other a human dressed in a frock coat and stovepipe trousers. Kirk sat up quickly, swinging his feet to the cloud beneath his slab. *A cloud?* he thought dazedly.

"How are you feeling?" asked the human.

"Confused," snapped Kirk. "Where are we? Who are you? What did you do to my ship? What right...?"

"Easy, James, easy. We will answer all your questions, though it is a little embarrassing to admit..."

The Andorian snorted and the human glowered at his friend.

Spock suddenly moved off his slab, fully alert. "Captain, are you...?" He trailed to a stop, but it was uncertain whether it was because Kirk waved him to silence or because he was fascinated with the strange floor covering.

"I'm all right, Spock. See about the rest of our men." Kirk's eyes never left the squirming human in front of him. "I'd like some answers... now!"

The human fidgeted, and looked to his companion. The Andorian grinned and crossed his arms in front of his chest, but remained silent. The human sighed, then shrugging, spoke: "My name is Josiah. This is Talar. You are...well, you are in Heaven." He finished in a rush and then waited resignedly.

Kirk felt a little blank. "You mean, we are on the planet Heaven?"

"Oh no, no," Josiah cheerfully responded. "You are *in* Heaven." Kirk continued to look confused. Josiah went on, "You know, Heaven? Angels, halos, afterlife...all that sort of thing?" His coaching had a very helpful tone.

Kirk glanced at the rest of his crew, now gathered around him. They were as confused as he, except, of course, Spock, who was impassively waiting for more data. Kirk shook his head to clear his slow thought process, but Josiah thought Kirk was rejecting the idea.

"Look," he said patiently. "You do remember the accident?"

The Andorian spoke disgustedly, "Josiah, you are making a mess of it, as usual."

"If you can do it so much better, why don't you?" Josiah retorted testily.

"I will. James, you and your friends were traveling in your shuttlecraft when there was an explosion in the warp engines. It tore your craft apart. You all died. All of you are now in Heaven, or more accurately, what some humans used to call 'Limbo'. Do you understand?"

Kirk was convinced that he was dealing with person or persons totally mad. "Yes, I understand. But tell me, why don't I feel dead?"

"That is where it gets a little embarrassing. You see, none of you were scheduled to die at this time. The accident occurred not only on your plane, but also in ours." He paused. "You aren't supposed to be here."

Kirk had to admit that they were one smooth set of liars. They really looked like they believed everything they were handing out. Following right along, he asked, "Why don't you just send us back then?"

The two "angels" exchanged another glance, and Josiah answered, blushing a little. "Because we don't have the authorization...or the power. If you will be just a little patient, our boss will be right here and he will explain every..."

Kirk had had about as much as he was going to stomach. "I suggest that your 'boss' get here right now. I would remind you that we represent the Federation. They don't much care for the destruction of their property, or the hijacking of their personnel. Even now, my ship is..."

"Preparing your bodies for proper disposal in accordance with your various cultures," a new voice broke in. The group was joined by a very old man, dressed in a long, off-white, wool robe. He was a big man, with gnarled hands and a flowing grey-black beard. Somehow he made Kirk feel like he was six years old again.

"Peter," began Josiah excitedly, "did you see Him? What did He say? What are we going to do with...?"

"Peace, Josiah. Everything is in control. The Man has laid down His instructions. Until this situation can be cleared up, they are to stay with Lucifer."

The Andorian and the human were both surprised. Josiah spoke for both of them. "He is sending them to Hell? Without even their Hearings?"

"It is only temporary. Since we haven't completed the urban renewal project in Valhalla yet, we just don't have any room for them. If they stay here, they would have to sleep in the streets. Gold may be pretty, but it is miserable to sleep on. Lucifer has that whole new section for the group from the Beta Kalpha genocide war, but they're not due to arrive for awhile, so these people can be put up there. At least they will have plenty of room, which is more than can be said

for us here. I'll never understand why Lucifer seems able to anticipate occupancy better than our guys." He shook his head in regret. "Well, that is neither here nor there. Why don't you boys show them the way. Lucifer knows they are coming."

Josiah was distressed. "But, Peter, is it fair that they should suffer the torments of Hell when they haven't even had their Hearings yet?"

"What suffer? They won't feel a thing. They will just be staying in Hell. Lucifer won't be able to control them. And let me tell you, he is pissed off about that. Still, what the Man says goes, and not even Lucifer can argue about it."

Peter's warm brown eyes turned on Kirk with a definite twinkle in them. "Come on, James. I know that you are just dying, you should pardon the expression, to tell me off. I must admit that I'm really looking forward to the end of your famous 'My-starship-has-the-power-to' speech. I would really like to see you and Korbon the Klingon have a go at it with your two ships. No one to get hurt, of course, but just a nice friendly battle of wits. Yes, that would really be something..."

"Klingons in Heaven?" Kirk asked, somewhat skeptical.

Peter chuckled. "That's almost what Korbon said when he found out that there were humans here. Really, James, you must get rid of the stereotypic ideas you have got of us up here. Now, are there any questions?"

"Yes. Who are you? Where are we? What have you...?"

Peter looked at Josiah and Talar in surprise. "Didn't you explain anything to them?"

The two angels nodded, and shrugged.

"Oh, I understand. Some of those." Peter turned back to Kirk. "James, I know that humans believe that death only comes to the other guy, but you are just going to have to accept the fact that you are dead...now. I'm sorry that I don't have the time to go over this with you, I still have the regular arrivals to deal with, but before your Hearing, I'll let you see the record of your death. That will make it easier for you to accept. Okay? Josiah, Talar, see you tonight at the bingo game." As silently as he had come, Peter was gone.

Kirk felt as if he were back on the Shore Leave planet; any moment the caretaker would pop up with his obscenely gentle smile. "Was that your boss? I wanted to talk to him."

Josiah answered him distractedly. "Yes, that was Peter.. You know him, of course, as Saint Peter. He is Supervisor of all new arrivals. But we had better be going; I've still got lots of work to do." He turned to lead them out.

Kirk's face took on a mulish expression. Talar saw and correctly interpreted it. "Josiah, I think they would like some time to assimilate everything that has happened. Why don't we leave

them alone for a few minutes?"

Josiah started to protest, but catching a signal from Talar, nodded his head in agreement. Then they both simply...disappeared.

Spock immediately moved to the walls to search for an exit. No matter how far he walked, the walls looked to be the same distance away. He looked back over his shoulder; the rest of the party were no further than five feet from him. He tried walking backward; though he felt that he was moving, the group never moved apart.

"Anyone got any ideas?" Kirk asked. "Spock?"

"I do not have enough data, Captain. We are in an unknown place, the captives of unknown people, and they seem to know a good deal about our history. Talar is dressed as an Andorian military guard of 600 years ago; Josiah is dressed as a nineteenth century American; and Peter is dressed as a first century Semetic. They are either an illusion or part of some elaborate plot for an as yet unknown reason."

"As best I can tell without instruments," McCoy reported, "they appear to be normal, healthy representatives of their respective races. It is possible that they are psychotic, but frankly, I am more inclined to feel that I have lost my mind and that none of this exists. Hmmm, maybe it was the brandy last night."

Spock looked pained. Kirk glanced from Chekov to Scott and back again. "What about you two?"

"I'll buy McCoy's explanation," Scotty answered. "We are all drunk somewhere and having one gigantic hallucination." Chekov nodded in agreement.

Kirk grinned at the image. "What about Spock? Is he drunk too?"

McCoy quipped quickly, "No, he's overdosed on some computer fumes."

The laughter seemed to break their tension. Kirk, wiping tears from his eyes, ordered, "Well, while they are moving us, everyone keep your eyes open. Especially watch for a way out of here."

Everyone nodded. Suddenly, they *were* someplace else, and Talar and Josiah were with them. The most noticeable thing was the noise: a sheer cacophony of screams, moans, and groans poured over them, strangely incongruent in the neat office in which they found themselves. A tall, thin man stood in an opened door beyond which flickered a red glow. He was dressed in a light blue coverall, cinched with a leather belt from Altair VI. His face was aquiline with a small black, Van Dyke beard, and he was very annoyed.

"Vortus, must I solve all your problems?" he shouted out the door. "Go see how Hitler did it. His methods were primitive, but he was a master at pain. If you must, release him from his torment long enough to explain to you how to set it up. But don't leave him out too long; he still has a

lot of time to serve." He slammed the door in frustration, muting the noise, and turned to face his visitors. "Oh, great," he commented sourly. "My 'guests' are here. Just what I needed, more hassles. Well, you have delivered them. What are you hanging around for? Would you like to join our happy little gang here?" He laughed wickedly as Josiah and Talar shuddered and disappeared.

The man moved behind a cluttered desk and sat down. Carefully, he scrutinized the men standing before him and noticed McCoy staring at his feet. "What did you expect, cloven hooves?" The doctor blushed in spite of himself.

"I'm Lucifer. I'm in charge down here. I realize that you are just here temporarily, but stay out of the way of my workers. Remember," he said nastily, "you could end up here permanently, and you wouldn't want to end up on my shit list, would you?"

Suddenly Kirk remembered several incidents in his past - and wished that he hadn't remembered. The office door opened to admit a short, petite woman into the room. She was a gorgeous red-head, stacked in all the right places. Chekov started to breathe heavily.

Lucifer frowned. "This is Sonyj. She is one of my succubi and will show you where you can stay. Now get out of here and leave me alone."

"But...but," stammered Kirk. Sonyj yanked him by the elbow and hustled him out the door; the others followed behind. "Not now," she hissed. "He's in a bad mood."

They found themselves in a giant room, stretching into infinity. There were walls and walls of flame, soaring to an unseen ceiling. Molten rock poured along the ground like rivers, and the boulders cast around were white-hot in appearance. The air was murky; vapors drifted up from massive crevasses. People were chained in various positions, screaming and writhing in pain. McCoy, looking appalled, tried to help one poor wretch who was chained to a molten rock, burning the flesh from the damned soul. But when McCoy accidentally touched the rock, it didn't even feel warm.

"Can't you get him off there?" McCoy snarled.

Sonyj looked startled, then boredom covered her face. "That is his punishment. There is nothing I can do for him, even if I wanted to. Which I don't. Come on."

Kirk tried to question her as they hurried through the ghastly place. "Why do you torture these people like this?"

As she led them into an open, dark room, a door closed behind them, shutting out the sights and sounds of the cavern. She fumbled for the lights and when she finally got them on, she stared Kirk straight in the face. "You don't even know where you are, do you? This is Hell. Do you understand? H-E-L-L. This is the punishment that some people -- Ha! -- *most* people get when they die. The only reason you can't hear the full in-

tensity of the sounds, or smell the poisons, or feel the fires is because you haven't officially been assigned here -- yet. And don't get cocky. I'll bet you end up here eventually. Most of you space fly-boys do." She leered appreciatively at Chekov; he leered back. "Well, I've got things to do. I'll be down in Torture Room Six if you need me," she remarked pointedly to the navigator.

When she was gone, Kirk and the others stared at each other. "Okay, they want us to think that we're in Hell. We *will* think we are in Hell. Meanwhile, get out there and get all the data you can. Act like we've accepted our fate and they won't expect us to give them trouble. *But I want a way out of here.* Is that clear?"

Sonyj returned to Lucifer's office. The devil looked up as she entered and grunted in greeting.

"I got them settled, boss. You know, I don't think they realize that they're dead. Are you sure it was a good idea to let them stay here?"

"No, I don't think it is a good idea, but what can I do? The Man says they are to stay here. You want to argue it with Him?" Lucifer snarled.

She tinkled a small laugh. "I wouldn't mind having a go at that old softie." There was a muted rumble of thunder and the ground shook slightly. Her face paled. "But of course I know he has everything under control," she added rapidly, in a louder voice. She left the office quickly.

"I hope so," Lucifer muttered under his breath.

Lucifer worked on his papers. He hated all the triplicate forms that he had to fill out, but there wasn't much he could do about it. Even Hell had its bureaucracy. He was startled when his intercom shrilled loudly. "What?!"

"Boss, you had better get down here," pleaded the voice of his chief engineer, Baspar.

"What's the matter? Has furnace #7 gone out again?" For the first time, Lucifer noticed how chilly the air around him seemed. He checked his office thermometer; the temperature had dropped to an uncomfortable 68°F. "Baspar, what the heck are you doing down there?"

"It ain't me, Boss," Baspar whined. "He's got the furnaces shut down."

Lucifer swore in an interesting little language that hadn't been heard in four millennia and tore out of his office. He noticed in passing that several of his "clients" seemed to be positively enjoying the chill while Lucifer himself was getting frostbite. Dashing into the room, the first thing he missed was the cheery roar of the furnaces. They were stone cold. Baspar stopped pacing the floor and looked up, patently glad to

see Lucifer. Spock was standing with his hands clasped around his back.

"What is going on here?" yelled Lucifer.

A begrimed figure rose from behind the furnaces, wiping his greasy hands on a dirty rag. Lucifer recognized the human called Scott. "These furnaces of yours are in terrible shape, sir. I should have them running more efficiently for you in about three days."

Lucifer choked on his rage, but remarkably kept his voice level. "Who told you to fool around with my furnaces? Do you realize what you have done? You have put us behind our quota!"

Lucifer clenched both hands and raised them upward. "This will never work!" He stomped out of the furnace room and headed back to his office, shouting over his shoulder. "Baspar, help that idiot get those furnaces going again. I want full heat in one hour."

As Lucifer walked along the path, he found that Spock was with him. The Vulcan said nothing, surveying his surroundings with great interest. Lucifer didn't like Vulcans very much and was grateful that he hadn't received many in the last 5,000 years. He gritted his teeth, looking forward



Scott seemed unfazed by the news. "Donna worry. When I get them fixed, you will not only make up your lost time, but you should get ahead on your schedule."

Lucifer turned to Spock desperately. "Will you please explain to him what he has done?"

Spock looked him calmly in the eye and announced, "Lucifer and Hell are figments of the imagination and do not exist. Therefore, no matter what Mr. Scott does here, it has no relevancy. You do not exist."

Lucifer pulled back his fist. "Let's see if a punch in the nose exists for you."

Baspar grabbed Lucifer's arm. "Boss, remember. You can't touch them. He wouldn't like it if you hurt them before they have had their Hearings."

to slamming his office door in Spock's face.

The sound of singing stunned Lucifer, and he stopped momentarily. A group of workers were sitting around a flaming pit. He walked over to the group and was annoyed when no one stood up as he approached.

"And what do we have here?" he asked, his voice deceptively pleasant. Some of the older demons looked nervous, but the younger ones just smiled at him. "We are off duty, sir. Spock showed us how to make a...a rec room, where we can have some fun while we relax for awhile."

Spock motioned Lucifer to the side while the group started another verse of a bawdy bar song that made even Lucifer blush. "I saw some of your efficiency ratings. Even for humans, they were very low. When I found out that they had no recreation, I made a few suggestions. And if you have

the time, I have some others on how to improve your crew in other areas."

At that moment, a Junoesque blond succubus ran by, screaming with laughter, chased by a half-naked Chekov.

"Gertrude!" bellowed an enraged Lucifer as the couple disappeared into the gloom. Lucifer and Spock took off after them, dodging obstacles in their path. When Lucifer tripped, Spock obligingly helped him up.

"I just don't believe this!" panted the livid Lucifer. "That was my girl!"

"Indeed?" commented Spock calmly. "I would not be too concerned. Mr. Chekov is too young to form any lasting relationships right now."

Lucifer snorted in disbelief and stamped back to his office, Spock trailing behind, only to find it in a total state of chaos. His secretary, with a faint air of bewilderment, was frantically searching through the files, all of which seemed to be scattered on the floor, chairs, and any other free surface. The file cabinets themselves were empty. Kirk was sitting at Lucifer's desk, using the pen the devil's own mother had gotten him for his birthday, and marking up his precious charts.

"What are you doing?" Lucifer's voice was curiously flat.

Kirk glanced up and grinned. "I thought I would help you out a little. I hate to be idle." He motioned Lucifer over to the desk and continued. "Look at this table of organization. You will notice that most of your senior staff seem to hold their positions due to time in service rather than their qualifications. If you would move this man..."

McCoy ambled into the office. "Jim, you should see the conditions around here. There are people here getting no medical treatment at all. The working conditions of the laborers..." McCoy noticed Lucifer and charged right up. "You know, Mr. Lucifer, for a so-called civilized man, you keep a pretty barbaric place here."

Spock interrupted, wanting to ease the doctor's anguish. "Doctor, this is an illusion. It does not exist except inside our minds. No one is really being hurt. It is illogical."

"What do you mean no one gets hurt?" Lucifer sputtered. "I'll have you know I run a very tight Hell here! And I don't need any of your re-organization and...what is that?!" His voice rose in a shriek. He ran out of the office, the Federation men following behind him.

Bulldozers were moving large chunks of the rapidly cooling earth while other groups of workers directed happy sinners in different directions. Kirk grinned sheepishly. "I hope you don't mind, but we are re-arranging Hell a little bit. You see, you don't have everything quickly accessible to you. You should be able to reach any section *within minutes*. Never know when trouble will show up."

In a numbed state, Lucifer walked back to his office. Kirk kept talking in one ear about "section chiefs" and "getting rid of the hodge-podge" while in his other ear Spock was explaining about the similarities of different "Hell" myths throughout the universe. He walked into the office and gently, even softly, shut the door, locking out three intruders. They could hear him on a communication line.

"I want to talk to Peter, and I want to talk to him *now*," Lucifer ordered.

Kirk whispered to McCoy, "Go find Scott and Chekov. I think there is going to be a change of scene." He chuckled in anticipation.

As McCoy took off in a run, Lucifer's voice became desperate. "Peter, you tell the Man that if He doesn't get these people out of here, I quit. And this time, I'm not kidding. I know I said that when you sent Ghengis Khan and his boys down here, but now I'm totally serious. At least Ghengis believed in me and respected my work. But this crowd! If it isn't the Vulcan telling me I don't exist, it's that nut, Scott, turning off my furnaces. And -- What do you want? No, not you, Peter. There is someone on the intercom. Hold on a second."

There was silence for a moment, then the sound of Lucifer crying from whatever news he was receiving on the intercom. "How can Sonyj be pregnant? She's a succubus! All right, so the kid isn't a member of Hell and the rules don't work with him. Does that mean that Sonyj can't take precautions?" There was more silence, then, "Okay. Okay. What else?" Silence. "What do you mean that you can't find Attila and his horde? Aren't they in section 2,874?"

Kirk grinned and whispered to Spock, "That is one of the groups I had moved."

Lucifer was speaking again. "He did, did he? Well, get things back to normal as quick as you can. I'm working here to get rid of the trouble. No more calls to me until I tell you. Peter. Peter, are you there? That is it. You tell the Man that he gets rid of them, or I and all my crew leave. How will He like that, huh? He won't get anyone to work cheaper than us."

There was more silence. Lucifer was obviously listening to the other party. "It is set up? Bless you, Peter. I'll send them right up to you."

As the door flew open, Lucifer yelled in Kirk's ear, "Kirk! Oh, there you are. Get the rest of your guys. You're leaving here."

"Oh, really," said Kirk sweetly. "Gee, we sure will miss you all."

McCoy, Chekov, and Scott came pounding down the path and the five of them entered the office. As they faded out, Kirk could see the devil heartedly waving goodbye; then they were back in their original area, with Peter.

"That was really a nasty thing to do to Lucifer, James. After all, he did offer you hospitality - of a sort. Anyway, the Man has decided that since we still don't have room for you and

it isn't really fair to cheat you of the life you have left just because one of our co-ordinators made a mistake, we will be sending you back. It will take a few moments since we have to set things up. Have patience."

Again Peter was gone and they were left in the strange grey room.

"How are we going to explain this to Starfleet?" Kirk mused.

"That is simple, Captain. We tell them that the beings from an unexplored planet rescued us when our ship exploded, but for some unknown reason told us that we were in a mythical afterlife. It will be up to Starfleet to decide if we should look for this planet or leave the natives alone."

"Yes, I suppose. Chekov, what happened to your face?" Kirk asked.

Chekov blushed and hid his left cheek. "There was this brunette, Captain. I guess she didn't like Russians."

McCoy chuckled. "From what I saw, she really hauled off and let him have it."

There was a sharp disorientation of being and all five men fell to the cloud.

Kirk could smell his ship and opened his eyes to look around. There was nothing to see, only blank darkness. He ran his hands around the perimeter of his...his...well, it felt like a bag, and

damned confining at that. He felt himself being raised as a voice in the distance intoned, "We commit the body of our brother, James Kirk, to the cleansing power of the sun. Jettison, Lieutenant."

That's Sulu's voice! Kirk felt himself moving feet first, and understanding flashed. *Omighod!*

"BELAY THAT ORDER!!" yelled Kirk, fighting to get out of the burial bag. "Let me out of he... oof!" He landed with a thunk on the floor.

Bedlam broke out as he could hear the rest of the shuttlecraft's crew yelling too. Even Spock was demanding release in a slightly louder voice than normal. As the *Enterprise* men released them from the burial bags, the noise level dropped to bearable. Kirk kicked the bag from around his feet with distaste and looked at the stunned Sulu, staring at him in disbelief.

"Well done, Sulu. How did you get us released from that planet?" Kirk wished he could hear "Peter's" snide remarks about "starship power" now.

"Planet, Captain? What planet?" Sulu was confused and not a little wary.

Kirk caught a queer feeling in his stomach. "Didn't you rescue us from a planet which the inhabitants claimed was Heaven or Hell?"

Sulu shook his head slowly. "No, sir. When the shuttlecraft blew, we just pulled in your... bodies." He looked over each of the five men. "You were dead, Captain...weren't you?"

And faintly, they heard the sound of demonical laughter accompanied by a wisp of sulphur.



"That rabbit is gonna be awful late!"

Starship *ENTERPRISE*

Rich Kolker

The doctor's in the sickbay; there's a Vulcan standing by,
All there to help me navigate this lonely sky.
A world unknown to planet-dwelling being's going on
The star-specked void in which we traveled where no man had gone.

CHORUS: Starship *Enterprise*
Warping all across the skies
My best friend and compatriot's
The starship *Enterprise*.

Well, we traveled through uncharted depths, the captain, ship and crew
To find what's going on, and see what we could do.
And I found some women I once knew; they're good to see again.
I thought of how it was, imagined how it might have been.

CHORUS:

La la la la I tried to love, but I couldn't find the way
la la la la la la la la la la la la
And I'd like to know the reason, but I don't know what to say
la la la hi hi hi *Enterprise*.

Well, the Starfleet's still my shepherd, and the Big E had to go
This time of life they bucked me up to Fleet CO
So I seldom fly, but the dream won't die; it churns inside of me
To lead my love, the *Enterprise*, across a starry sea.

CHORUS: Repeat twice, 2nd time repeat last line

Rich Kolker

(to the tune of "Late Night Radio")

ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER

*What does
one
do
when
someone cries*

*for a
love
lost.
For
a dream ended*

*He is
an
emotional
being;
I am not,*

*yet I
feel
a
need
to comfort him.*

*I could
make
him
forget
but no*

*that isn't
the
solution
for
my friend.*

*I sit
beside
him
and
touch him*

*with my
mind.
It's
easier
than words.*

*I liked
her
also.
Let
me help.*

Merlin Thomas

NI VAR FOR A CAGE

Ann Popplestone

"Don't let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right."

*Salvor Hardin
First Mayor of the First Foundation*

I've violated every rule, idea and more I've ever known.

Legality and morality are not synonymous.

It is certainly an elaborate form of suicide.

No one said that Star Fleet was overly safe and a death is to be mourned only if the life was wasted.

I'm causing Jim great pain.

Better a bruised ego than what he would do to himself if you told him.

Mendez is an unknown quantity.

He is an illusion.

What is to keep the real one from also blaming Jim?

The return trip will allow time for his anger to subside and Jim will have "captured a dangerous

mutineer, kidnapper and pirate" without losing any personnel or equipment.

Jim won't think so.

True, but his protests will be dismissed in view of the ease with which the mutiny was accomplished. Rumors are already starting at Star Base.

Am I right to turn Chris over to the Talosians?

He has nothing that resembles a life anywhere else.

But he "condemned the Talosian race to death."

If they had wanted revenge, they would have taken it thirteen years ago. They have no logical motive for deception.

And I do not have one for mutiny.

You've been around humans too long. You're paranoid.

Untrue and irrelevant.

You've picked a poor time to have second thoughts.

I'm not. I am getting Chris to Talos and Jim is in the minimum of danger.

Just keep repeating that.

Why couldn't they have left something to read in here? Security cells are extraordinarily uninteresting.

Normal people are asleep at three in the morning.

Normal people aren't on trial for mutiny.

The outcome is not much of a mystery. You know how the illusion sequence will end. And what will happen when we return to Star Base.

I'm concerned about Jim.

You heard the guards talking of how he is snapping at people and "prowling" the corridors. He'll not think of anything that will prevent our arrival.

Our arrival is not what concerns me. The results do.

You know that what you are doing is right.

Indeed.

You are giving Pike as much of a life as he can have anywhere. And you are the only one who will come to harm.

Certainly.

So why can't you sleep?

Who asked you?

CHILD OF MINE

Rich Kolker

Space shipper, star tripper, eyes twinkling bright
Tell me your thoughts on this cold, crystal night.
Moonbeamer, sky-dreamer, open of mind,
Are your eyes set on stars; is your quest leaving Earth far behind?

CHORUS: I'm living in a better world, 200 years from now,
Aboard a ship, exciting trip. Come join; I'll show you how.
As fast as light our cause is right, we cross the galaxy:
The captain and his alien friend, a doctor, crew and me.

Young spacer, strange-placer, please tell me why?
What's this fixation twixt you and the sky?
Child of mine, give a sign; please let me know
Why your love is out there in a place that you never will go?

(SPOKEN) Don't you see!

CHORUS:

Void prancer, star dancer, why don't you see
There's problems on Earth, so your dream just can't be.
Optimist, there's a list endlessly long
Why your trek through the stars won't begin; there's just too much that's wrong.

(SPOKEN) No, you don't see.

CHORUS:

We will make this better world; the time to start is now.
There's lots to do before we're through. Come join; I'll show you how.
I see a light, a beacon bright; a sign of what should be.
And that is why I join the crew as they cross the galaxy.



Blazing Starship

RICH KOLKER

He rode a blazing starship out to the shining stars.
He searched for girls and barships, and Klingons near and far.
He conquered fear and he conquered hate,
Spread truth the American Way!
He made the Prime Directive a torch to light the way.

When Klingons threatened space, and fear filled the land
A cry went out for a man with guts to take the stars in hand.
The Feds sought a man who was brave and true,
With Justice for all as his aim.
When out of the pile came a man with a smile
And Kirk was his name. And Kirk was his name.

He rode a blazing starship out to the shining stars.
He searched for girls and barships, and Klingons near and far.
He conquered fear and he conquered hate,
Spread truth the American Way!
He made the Prime Directive a torch to light the way.

Rich Kolker

(to the tune of "Blazing Saddles")

Renewal

One by one, now, on the planets out there
The lights are being kindled.

It is the Ceremony of Remembering.
We who live in the ways of the Force
Recall our heritage,
The guidance of the Great Ones,
The Guardians who have
Come - like a flicker in the sky
Lived - like the candles we light, and having lived
Claimed - and passed within the River.

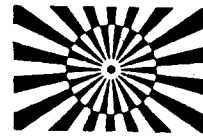
We honor the teachers,
Knowing, O Companions,
That the Force has burst out in new wisdom
Born on a hundred thousand worlds.

The future is ours within this Cup of Wine,
Spilled out as an offering
To embody what cannot be said.
For when that dawn takes the skies
We shall find that we have known it -
Yes, the future dawn,
All, all the ages past,
The unfailing luminosity of growth to come,
Even to our very core.

Remembering this, O Jedi,
Remembering this
Take strength to live.

Angela-marie Varesano





A
Thousand Worlds
Chronicles
Story

THE RELUCTANT REBEL



by Maggie Nowakowska

INTRODUCTION

Yavin 4, 6102 midyear

"Ship coming in! Extreme sensor range."

General Willard heard the call and hurried down an aisle lined with technicians working on the latest clutch of damaged ship control banks to arrive at Yavin 4 in the aftermath of the rebel Alliance's first organized battle with the Empire. As he made his way to the detection display screens on the far side of the room, the general was careful not to disturb anyone; twenty ships had been lost in that first confrontation and the rebellion against the Empire needed every available X-wing and Y-wing in working order if the momentum inspired by their victory were not to be lost. Still, Willard moved quickly. Every unknown ship entering the Yavin system was a potential enemy.

Willard was a tall man for a Mayon native, a bit more lightly built than average, yet broad enough to create an illusion of bulk. He was fifty-five though the white hair that ruffled the sides of his full, square face made him appear much older. Creases accented his eyes and there were deep lines about his mouth, marks of responsibility which nevertheless could not dim the brightness in his eyes or the gentle curve to his smile. However curious a hand fate had dealt him, Nik Willard played his game with the enthusiasm of a much younger man; he thought of himself as a survivor and did not allow the worries of introspection to age his spirit too quickly.

The rebel general leaned over the console of a young pilot from Ryman and studied the comscreen. That ship was moving fast enough to be a cruiser! "Have you received any readout from it yet?" he asked.

Myek Bocel shook his head. "Red leader's sitting out a width, just at horizon." Bocel turned questioning eyes to the general. "He's waiting for our word."

Willard glanced at the ship data that started to come over the screen as the strange vessel approached. The configuration seemed to imply a freighter. He pointed that out to Bocel, but the Ryman shook his head. No, none of his suppliers were due in.

"Readout coming in, channel 5!" a voice sounded. Bocel snapped in a transfer to his terminal. The message was short, a type used when a ship's communications were damaged. Bocel tuned the sensors; yes, they confirmed concentrations of radiation about the ship's hull.

"Hoboy," Myek murmured to himself. "That baby's seen some action. Still, I wonder if she's faking that com--"

"Pass the ship, Myek," Willard said suddenly. "I can guarantee it's not an Imperial vessel."

Bocel looked up at Willard, who seemed lost in thought, then studied the data on his screen once again. The ship's registry meant nothing to him, nor did the name, *Millennium Falcon*. Han Solo sounded familiar, like a name heard once, but there had been too many names over the years, too many beings met in his position as Supplies Coordinator for the Alliance for Myek to remember them all. After a moment of hesitation, he shrugged and began to program the clear-pass order.

Millennium Falcon! Willard noted with humor. Obviously, the boy was as flamboyant now as he once was. The general tried to picture the Corellian's face and found that beyond the sarcastic smile and animated, if wary, eyes, it was difficult to recall an image of the young man who had unwittingly brought him to the protection of the Alliance Cell on Ryman years ago. *Ah, surely Solo has changed some since then*, the general thought; *he has to be thirty at least now*. Willard wondered how life had treated the brash young smuggler over the years. How many other port commanders had he flummoxed; how many other Imperial border guards had he escaped? And what in the universe was he doing coming in on Yavin?!

"Vocal pickup coming through now," Bocel reported.

"...Repeating," an irritated, but controlled, voice announced. "Keep those ships off me. I've got your princess here and her precious droids, and I don't want any trouble putting this bird down. This is Han Solo and the *Millennium Falcon*. We are not the enemy. Repeat. Do not fire."

The static increased and the voice faded slightly. Bocel potted up, moving the volume lever to its highest level, but the pickup was still faint; the speaker seemed to be addressing someone who stood away from the comlink. "I don't think they heard me, Princess. You better hope those ships keep their space; no X-wing's gonna stand up to my--"

The connection broke. "Commander," Bocel began slowly as he repeated the "Hold" message to the rebel ships on patrol. "Is that who I think it is? I didn't recognize the name, but that voice... the Corellian? The one who brought you to Ryman and ended up with--"

"It is," Willard injected. "You're right. His way of talking is hard to forget. You better make sure those ships don't fire."

"They won't, though if I remember that ship right, I doubt they'd have to worry."

Willard made a polite noise of disbelief. He had seen that ship up close, had *flown* it when the mantor freighter had been simply called the *Falcon*; the addition of *Millennium* to its name could only mean Solo had worked the ship over even more.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that, Myek," Willard corrected, then repeated the admonition softly, as if to himself, "Not too sure at all."

Why *should* Solo be any different now? It was, after all, only five years since that day on Mayon, and Corellians really don't change *that* much....

1

Non, 6096 49th week

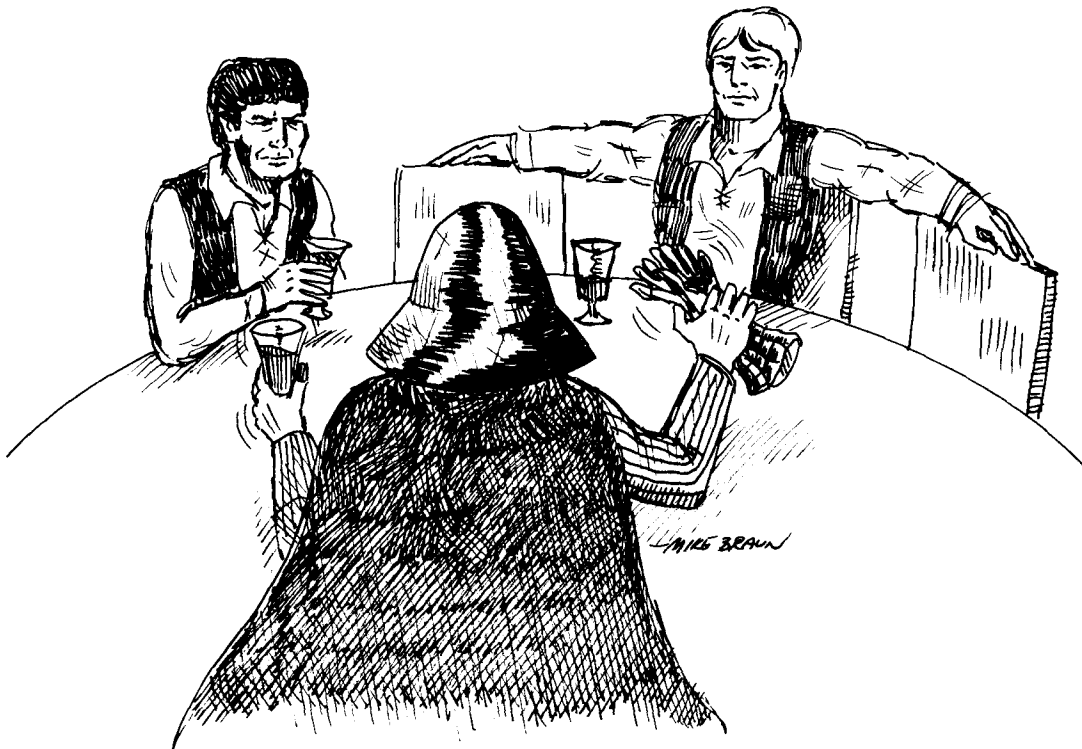
The two Corellians seated at the cantina table had been disowned by their compatriots long ago for acts of theft, murder, betrayal and piracy whose baseness violated even the admittedly lax standards of most Corellian Independents. Their untouchable status did not bother QenTReveno and Get. In fact, it pleased them. Most traders were too terrified of the duo to argue and so their business ventures, legitimate or not, seldom met with any trouble. Other beings valued their lack of values as highly as they, and paid well for the expert, if questionable, services the two could supply.

The darkly clothed upper-caste Sith with whom they spoke in a downport bar on Non a week before Year's End did not doubt their daring, or their

ability to meet any future demands made for proscribed chemicals such as the contraband that was hidden in the satchel by his feet. But there was a time limit on this shipment and Port Commander Willard on Mayon was getting dangerously close to breaking the cover under which the chem smuggling took place. The Sith knew that Willard, using the Corellians' reputation as an excuse, had doubled the surveillance of their ship during its last run.

"The question is," Ly Tron said in a low voice, "whether you can make this delivery at all. I doubt it. Especially within the time required." Tron's scarlet eyes were fired with an intensity that matched the growing threat in his tone. "Manac himself will be on Mayon to accept this shipment, and Manac answers only to Darth Vader. I have no intention of being the one who provides Willard with the proof that the Dark Lord is involved."

Qen waved the concern away and countered with, "If Willard already suspects you Sith are smuggling clone chems, why doesn't he just go to the IEB and report you? And why should you be so damn worried about Trooper Central in the first place?" Something about this contract had bothered TReveno from the beginning. Sith worked side by side with the Empire; their Dark Lord gofered for Tarkin, the region's governor and the Emperor's eager heir apparent. Why should they be so anxious to keep their dabbling in cloning secret? Rumor had it the Empire had dirtied its realm with that sort of



thing long ago and was getting ready to loose its first crop of puppet stormtroopers any time now. Why not just tag Sith interests onto the Empire's activities? Qen didn't mind dangerous jobs, but getting caught between the Empire and the Sith was a fool's fate. He glanced at Get whose idea these runs had been in the first place. The quiet blond giant, who was nearly a match for the Sith in size if not in coloring, seemed unconcerned, even a trifle bored with the questions. Qen looked back to the Sith. "Why..." he began.

"'Why' is not in your contract, Corellian!" Tron snapped. "It is enough for you to know that the Empire must remain unaware of your cargo and its connection with the Sith. As for Willard..." a well-formed, but powerful, hand made a depreciatory gesture as the voice relaxed. "He wears Imperial insignia, but its meaning has little impression on him. Willard would regard the exposure of our business as some sort of private, moral victory, not to be shared with the IEB. Which, I think it is safe to say, he considers as despicable as you."

A half-smile appeared on Ly Tron's face and he laughed silently, though whether at his small joke or at Willard was difficult to say. He sipped at his drink, then added conversationally, "Willard has unwittingly stymied even covert Imperial activity with his thoroughness."

"How does he get away with it?" Get asked, speaking for the first time, his voice low and still touched with the slight, harsh accent of Corell's northern mountain ranges. Just as nearly twenty years of life within the galactic civilization had not erased the feeling of earth-bound power, primitive and parochial, that radiated from Get, neither had it washed the clipped tones of his home Community from his speech. Get had never changed, remaining the moody countryman who saw life as merely another rival to be beaten into submission.

A dark Sith eyebrow raised at the question. So many inquiries from two who usually asked about nothing more than cargo, destination and fee! "Imperial need for Maian sympathy is 'how'," Tron began, watching their reactions closely. "Willard knows many members in the Senate; he is well-liked, respected. Maians on the whole tend to consider themselves outside the concerns of other folk and bound only by their Words of Honor. Willard is more diligent than most, yes, but until recently has been too inoffensive to bother with...or replace."

When Get grunted in disapproval, Tron understood the Corellian's interest. Not politics, but a question of procedure - and power. The Sith agreed. Disrespect for the Empire was nourished by slack discipline; even one individual who dared to flout authority was dangerously excessive. Darth Vader had set an example with the Jedi, but the Empire was slow to consider lesser beings equally threatening. Ly Tron thought of Palpatine's mistake in trusting Ray Caril of Aguens. How many emperors, he wondered, would have to fall before one rose who was strong enough to eliminate the waste and foolishness of Imperial bureaucracy? Tron knew Lex Tarkin had ambitions to the throne despite his currying of Emperor Caril's favor; had

the Grand Moff learned enough over the years from his association with the Dark Lord of Xet to be able to control totally?

Or would it be up to the Sith and Darth Vader to reestablish order? Tron felt smugly confident at the thought of his Dark Lord as Lord Ruler of the Universe. With time, and the success of projects such as the one he and these pirates were involved in, not even the Empire would prevail against Darth Vader when the day came.

Tron stood to leave. "Still, Willard's day is nearly over," he commented without explanation. "We are prepared."

The two Corellians made no movements which acknowledged their acceptance of intention to leave. They did not consider the negotiations over, and Ly Tron suspected they would not hesitate to attempt to detain him physically should he begin to leave with the goods. He was both amused and impressed by their fearlessness while the calm calculation that shone in each man's eyes caused him to mentally salute them. Get and TReveno were Corellian ruffraff, but they were fighters even a Sith could respect.

Tron did not reclaim the satchel beneath the table. "Very well. Our contract remains. You *must* make delivery before the holiday...if you do, well, there will be a 30% bonus on your next cargo."

Qen accepted the new terms with a nod. Ly Tron made a slight bow, gave both TReveno and Get a skeptical look, and left.

Get's gaze followed Tron's dark figure as it disappeared from the barroom through the door to the city street. He had not missed the implication in the Sith's farewell. "He's got a point about Willard," Get observed casually as he turned back to his partner.

"Hey," Qen said with a smile, "I hear Han Solo's looking for a new pilot."

"So the fem's left him. What does he have to do with this?"

"He's the one who'll dodge that stuff to Mayon for us."

"What?! Are you crazy? Uh-uh, I ain't trusting my neck to no punk like Solo." Get snorted in disgust, then studied Qen and tried to figure out what his partner was really up to. Qen had always been a little crazy about Solo ever since the kid had jumped him on Corell years ago; sometimes Get couldn't figure out whether Qen hated Solo, or wanted to adopt him. "Don't you ever give up, TRev? You've been fishing after that brat so long you've forgotten he's grown up and learned to bite back. I don't care how smart you think he is, he ain't gonna join us on this."

Get paused to pour himself another glass of *klevas*. The change in his demeanor would have surprised the Sith had he been present to see it. Talking with TReveno, Get's brooding, hulking air vanished. No longer was he the quiet, less intel-

ligent lieutenant awaiting his captain's decisions; now it was clear he and Qen were partners, each with his own talents and duties but each also with an equal dependence on the other.

They were a team bound together by personalities so complementary they had long forgotten how to imagine being separated. Get and Qen had their differences, but they also had each other, and the relationship was more important than any other goals. They did not love, for love was beyond their understanding, but Get was Qen and Qen was Get...and as they both valued the only important being in the universe - himself - the partnership flourished.

Han Solo was the one tangible area of contention between them for TReveno seemed fascinated by the danger the boy presented, while Get feared it. The feud between the men and the young pirate was already legendary among Corellian spacers, and few were willing to guess where it would end, though all assumed it would end violently.

"Even if he did agree to hold," Get continued, "I say 'no'. I don't like him; I never did. I shoulda killed him back on Corell."

Reaching for the pitcher of *klevas*, Qen dismissed the years-old complaint. "Hey, fuzzface, don't knock the kid's talents. You and I have made a pretty penny off his cargos and until that rat-trap ship of his can beat the *Sport*, we'll make a hell of a lot more." Qen drank deeply from his glass of the highly-spiced Frieled wine, then refilled it. "Now, we should've had that last load of his to Ves; I don't like it when marks slip out from under me that way. To my sights, Han owes us a favor."

"Solo is not going to carry clone chems and you know it! He'll just stick that smartass nose of his in the air and--"

"Hey, dummy," Qen slapped lightly at the side of Get's thick golden beard. "I didn't say I was going to *tell* him he's carrying them."

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With an angry shrug, Get turned away from Qen. TReveno smiled to himself. He had all night to wait for Get's reluctance to wane; according to the gossip-chain, Solo was not due in Main Port from the provinces until next sunset. *Nothing like a legitimate load to take a person chasing all over a planet*, Qen thought sarcastically, *but better for us that Han is flying clean into Mayon; less complications and official nosiness.*

Qen poured himself some more wine, then sat forward, cupping the glass with his long, scarred hands. Idly, he began to study the other patrons of the bar. A few returned the opportunity for mutual examination, but most preferred to ignore Qen's stares. TReveno was known as a deadly and dirty fighter who, if the mood struck him, would provoke a disagreement just to prove his prowess. Slightly smaller than Get, with a smoother, deceptively light cast to his build, Qen relied on quick movements and ruthlessness for his victories. And he

seldom lost.

There were no takers to any unspoken challenges that night, not even some lost sucker to practice a little flim-flam on. Qen sighed with good-humored resignation; at least Solo was good for a few laughs.

~~~~~  
Get mulled over the idea of using the younger Corellian as a patsy for a while longer. He knew Qen well enough to figure out how they'd do it, but...*But nothing!* Get looked over at his dark-haired, handsome partner. TReveno was city-bred, with a far more sophisticated manner and definitely more cosmopolitan tastes than Get; TReveno had always maintained these traits gave him the edge in any decision-making the two might face. But Get knew Qen had been wrong before.

He thought of what the Sith had said about Willard and the Imperials. Qen was like the Empire and its attitude toward the Maian Port Commander: too willing to let an enemy live if there was some profit in it. Qen was charming when he wanted to be, brutally callous when someone stood in his way, but he judged each situation only by what could be gained from it and ignored the consequences of his actions. Get himself did not consider the moral aspects of his actions, but he could sense danger. And he'd taken Han Solo's measure ten years ago. The kid was dangerous. He had warned Qen, too, but the other Corellian had just laughed. Scared of a fourteen year old? Not him.

Time had proven Get right, though. Solo had grown fast, crafty, with an amazing ability for avoiding destruction. Their run-ins with the young Delta-region Corellian might amuse Qen, who, despite Solo's gradual transformation from a merely precocious teenager to a formidably versatile adult, still preferred to think of him as a harmless annoyance. Get knew better. Solo operated by different rules than they; one day he would decide it was his right, maybe even his responsibility, to blast them away. And...

Hell. Get shifted in his chair and glowered at TReveno. He knew it was useless to argue; once Qen got an idea about the kid, nothing he could say would talk him out of it. "I shoulda killed him back on Steen," Get grumbled, signaling his capitulation.

"Get," TReveno sighed as he poured his partner another glass of *klevas*. "Do me a favor? Shut up."

Mayon, 6096 Galactic Year's End

Good pilots who can skillfully fly a converted, customized freighter without smart remarks about certain curious adaptations, who can figure overload percentages and trajectory angles while

sweet-talking a port controller into correcting his records "just a bit", who can shut up when told to and bail the captain out of trouble without having to be ordered to, and who can get along with a reckless, sarcastic, amiable but often trigger-happy Corellian are...hard to find.

Han Solo had had one such co-pilot and partner (well, maybe she had never been slow with the smart remarks, and never too quick to shut up, but...) only to lose her to an urge to travel on and a one-time-only deal on her own freighter.

The sixteenth Imperial year was rapidly drawing to an end when Solo began to get bored with his fruitless search for some being to take Althea Dareen's place. For the last half year, he had hired and fired more spacers than he cared to count. One had lost that part of a cargo which had meant the ship's profits; another was so conscientious that even the smuggled goods had tags; there had been silent types who made Han yawn, and endless talkers who made him jumpy; humanoids and aliens, but none who pleased Solo or gave him the confident feeling he wanted when his life depended on his trust in his co-pilot. Not one lasted more than three jobs.

He had been without a steady partner before; two years had passed after acquiring the *Falcon* before he had met Al. At twenty, he had been fussy, willing to wait till the right person came along. Now nearing his twenty-fifth birthday, Han was still fussy, but a bit more impatient. His *Falcon* was a good ship, and he a good pilot, but it still took two to manage the freighter, and often, two to handle its customers.

For the tenth time since hiring the Corellian who sat beside him in the *Falcon's* cockpit as the ship slipped into Maian space, Han cursed the day Al had left. He didn't really blame her, but he was angry anyway. This man was one more loser and Han would soon be looking for a new pilot - again.

Once the *Falcon* was secured in its hangar, Han fired KolWTuv. The Corellian took the news calmly, with little more than a snort and a shrug in response. Since Han had partially hired the man for his size and feistiness, he was a bit relieved WTuv didn't argue. Solo was in no mood for a fight; there would be plenty of time for fun once the Galactic New Year's celebrations got underway. Right now he had to unload his cargo, get paid, and find another co-pilot. Especially the last, for Han had no intention of spending New Year's on Mayon; he was headed for Ustella's moonport, where the annual Holiday Rendezvous of Corellian Independents was scheduled to begin the next day, galactic time.

As much a business convention as an excuse to carouse, party and generally raise hell without the worry of immediate Port Guard interference, a Corellian Rendezvous was a community event, a family reunion for Corell's expatriots and friends, a chance to gossip and trade tips on the ever-fluctuating demands of galactic commerce. The coming week would be Solo's eleventh Rendezvous, and thoughts of the good times ahead occupied Han's attention as he paid WTuv.

The burly man pocketed the credit chit without comment, lifted his heavy leather trunk of belongings onto his shoulder and walked away from the *Falcon's* hatchway. *What a creep*, Solo thought in farewell; *good riddance!*

The *Falcon's* payload was scheduled for a late afternoon pick-up, but Han decided to complete the Port paperwork immediately. This shipment was clean; in fact, everything aboard the *Falcon* was legit this run, and with no clandestine meetings to keep or unsavory characters to contend with, Han knew he could guarantee the day's freedom if he were quick and efficient at the start. The suppliers could handle this unloading without his supervision.

Filing the correct forms and claiming a departure time with the controller took little more than a tenth. Han stuffed his receipts in a vest pocket as he left the office. The money for this job would be automatically transferred to a local account upon completion of delivery; the amount was healthy, and despite the taxes legitimate cargos always cost, Han would have enough ready cash to assure a good bargaining position with the local free-lance spacers. He might not find his partner here - he doubted it - but at least he'd be able to afford a top-rated one-timer.

"That's far enough, Corellian."

Barely three steps out of the controller's doorway, Han found his plans changed. He had seen the Port guards walking down the hall toward the office, but had dismissed them as unimportant to him. He was clean this time; why should he worry?

Two short-range blasters drawn and aimed at his chest proved him wrong. Han didn't need to be told what to do. Slowly, he raised his hands.

"Hey," he said genially, "not this time, boys. I'm clean."

"So you say," the guard to his right answered as he relieved Solo of his blaster. "'Bout as clean as a Redancian verdecoccus. Get those hands on your head."

Angered by the insult, Solo started to bring his hands down. A warning hum from a blaster's prepcharger made him pause. He glanced at the other guard. The grim look on the man's face told Han he wasn't bluffing. In five seconds that blaster would fire and at this range not even a novice could miss. The guard looked well experienced. Han did as he was told.

The hum stopped. Holding up an official summons disk, the guard initiated legal proceedings.

"Captain Han Solo," he began, pausing only for Han to acknowledge. "Of the freighter called the *Falcon*, classification: Corellian Independent; Sector registry: Rynan, CWX0965-8674."

Han smiled slightly as he nodded again. That wasn't the number by which they had known him on Rynan; apparently the being he had paid off to change the last outgoing sector roster had done his job. When the ruckus over that last bit of trouble

in Rylla faded from the local officials' memories, he would have to go back and treat that Skylan predecessor royally. Right now, of course, he had to shed these two -- "What?!"

"...under arrest for the illegal possession of and smuggling of the clone chems known as Olatel, Ubentel, and Yertel," the man was saying to Han's astonishment. Tucking the summons into one of Han's vest pockets as he finished, the guard concluded with, "By order of Nik Willard, Commander Port Mayon. Come with us."

"Now wait one minute!" Solo protested as the guards motioned for him to move along. "Are you guys crazy? What do you think I am?" A strong push only fueled his indignation. "Look, you han-garhacks, I wouldn't touch..."

"MOVE!" The guard at his left held his blaster at Han's temple and reactivated the prepcharger. Solo shut up and began to walk down the hall. If these two really thought he dealt in cloning chems outside of Imperial jurisdiction, they would happily fry him.

Probably would even if I were working for the Empire, Han thought with morbid amusement. He knew the local commander had kept the Port Mayon police independent of Imperial supervision, yet assuming the rumors about Imperial cloning farms were true...Well, better to do most of the work right here on Mayon where medics were handy though Han didn't think the locals would approve of such activity. Maians had good reasons to hate any reminders of the old wars; for over ten years, the results of Clone experimentation and the carnage of battle had passed through their ports to the hospitals and cure homes. But Han suspected the Empire hadn't asked for local approval.

Solo glanced at the grim expression on the face of the guard at his right. *Probably pretty damn touchy about such things,* he reminded himself, discarding a moment's temptation to bolt when they reached the elevator. *Better to work out this misunderstanding the long way. Safer, too.*

The elevator doors slid open. Han and the guards stepped into the cab, then turned to face the doors as they slid closed without incident.

Mayon was the foremost hospital world in the galaxy; in fact, the only world where the entire galactic economy was based on medical care, research and development. As such, it experienced far more than the average share of smuggling. The most active point of entry and exit for illegal goods was the planet's major port - designated Port Mayon for easy recall by travelers - at the capital city of Wilbay. Drugs and expensive equipment dominated the contraband on the planet, but at Port Mayon, more complicated and delicate varieties of activity surfaced: corporate technological theft, kidnapping of both prized scientists and many a prominent person who came to Mayon for healing.

Port Commander Nik Willard ran his facilities strictly, but fairly. He handled the diplomatic

levels of his job with expert care, and was technically creative enough to have designed a transport system that was the model for other worlds' emergency port systems. Though the problem of containing illegal activity was complicated by Mayon's frequent need for haste and efficiency, Willard and his Port Guards kept a diligent watch on galactic traffic and the rowdy downport area. The commander's insight had confounded many a common bouncer; as for the more sophisticated thieves, Willard was always tenacious enough to follow the technical twistings and pseudo-legal maneuvers they employed as smoke until his record of broken conspiracies could not be challenged by even his most ambitious rivals among the port commanders in the sector.

It was not corporate plotting that merited Nik Willard's concern in the closing months of 6096, but a smuggling operation far more delicate, one woven through with political intrigue, and far more dangerous because of whom it implicated.

Using other beings for cover, Sith agents were transporting some of the most sophisticated, and rare, chemicals ever devised for new growth and rejuvenation. *Smuggling* them, when the Empire could have provided all they needed upon request; *using stealth* when it had been their own Dark Lord who had saved precious clone data from destruction when the Jedi libraries had burned, who had turned the data over to the Imperial scientists himself.

Willard did not enjoy thinking about what the Sith would do with such chemicals, such knowledge. A Sith take-over of the Empire? No!

The clone chems themselves did not bother Willard, though as a youth he had fought in the Wars. From a scientific viewpoint, there was nothing unethical about cloning; such techniques provided the base for many of Mayon's most advanced healing sequences. Even such simple aids as connective creams were developed from the same. The hatred most commonfolk held for the Clones and the science associated with them grew out of that past government's practice of genocide and its disregard for "impure" sentient life.

The temptation of a philosophy which tampered with the natural development of life forms, the alluring idea of millions of predictable, identical troops sounding to one call had proven attractive to many governments on many planets over millennia. The Clones were not the first. But they were the only movement to challenge the Republic's ancient, and strict, regulations on cloning research and development. By the time the Wars had ended, billions of beings across the galaxy had died as the science was discredited and the cultivation of individual clones proscribed by the Republic's angry populace.

Twenty years after the destruction of the Clone Imperium, when another coalition had been successful in the galactic subjugation the Clones had failed at, the belief in the sanctity of the unique individual - which had been part of the philosophy of the Republic - was still strong, still so ingrained in the people of the galaxy that the Empire felt the need to conceal its plans for cloned troops until the day they would be fact.

Willard, and most Imperial officials on Mayon, knew that day was soon approaching. There was little he alone could do to stop it. Commissioner Aben Dicton had tried to leak classified information to a CenterWorld newslink reporter stationed on Mayon; his death had seemed accidental, but the Empire had seen to it that other officials privy to the same information as Dicton had been made aware of the details of that "accident".

That sort of aggressive action was not Willard's style, but when word came that some non-Imperial interests were stockpiling clone chems and smuggling them to Mayon from the distant Nery systems for reasons yet undetermined, he decided to stop the flow. This was something he could control safely; this was his job. And, he admitted only to his sister, it was a matter of honor.

The Empire had heard the same rumors as Willard and sent curious inquiries to his office about "unusual smuggling activities". The memos and visitors never gave any clues that they suspected the Sith, and Willard said and did nothing to enlighten them. The Imperial Enforcement Bureau would only cover up the activity, he reasoned, especially if they found it impossible to stop. Willard himself had no idea what he would do with the Sith when he caught them, but he was certainly not going to turn them over to the IEB! Perhaps the bastards would discover each other's intrigues on their own and start fighting. Perhaps the bastards would debilitate each other in the process.

Such disruptive thoughts came more often nowadays. Willard's bitterness over the Empire's means of government increased steadily, and he could not deny his nagging desire to wield one telling blow against its vastness.

In the middle of the Sith/clone investigation, Willard had been informed by his superiors that his position required a personal assistant. A new commission position was created, and Willard soon found a Bestinian at his side to help - and advise.

Educated in Imperial attitudes and ethics, diligent in their application, Carlyn Brun - and her advice - symbolized everything the commander hated about the Empire: she was opportunistic, unsympathetic, and unscrupulous in pursuit of a goal.

As he watched the petite brunette walk briskly into his office with the Corellian smuggler's files on the last official day of the galactic year, Nik Willard realized that he had come to hate even the woman herself.

Yes, he thought, upset by the strength of the emotion, it is time to get out, to divorce myself from the mess the galaxy has become. Time to find a quiet job - a commercial fleet commander perhaps - and leave this behind.

Willard watched Brun as she inserted the report tape, her fingers playing across his computer with an ease the commander found uncomfortable. *A person should at least act a bit unsure at someone else's desk,* he thought irritably, his sense of privacy affronted by her familiarity.

Brun will be a damned nuisance with this interrogation, he predicted with a mental sigh. *A nuisance I will bear with, I suppose, as a toast to Imperial paranoia.*

He thought again of retirement. He was weary of dancing through the Empire's dictums, sidestepping outrageous demands while struggling to keep his integrity intact. It was getting too difficult to dodge those distasteful orders now; Carlyn was at his side constantly, and the new Emperor's nervousness seemed to have spread through every Imperial department. What little room there had been to maneuver within the Empire grew yet even smaller.

There were other factors which contributed to the commander's feeling of constriction. Though the legendary rebel Alliance had done nothing yet to actually threaten the Empire, the rumors, raids and general dissention it encouraged had caused the Imperial government to tighten its security, to be more restrictive, more impatient, with its more independent servants.

Servants whose actions displayed a suspicious amount of self-determination.

Servants such as Nik Willard, Commander, Port Mayon.

2

The commander nodded in grim satisfaction as the Port Guards brought the smuggler into his office. He glanced at the file data on his comscreen, then back at Han Solo. The accused pilot had launched a furious and loud defense the moment he had stepped before Willard's desk, but one look at Solo's record destroyed any credibility Willard might have awarded most of the man's story.

"Solo," Willard injected sternly into the tirade, "damper it." He glanced at the guards who stepped closer. "Your way, or ours."

In another situation, Han might have reconsidered his approach. He knew Willard's reputation as a straight official, one who was fair but had little patience for nonsense. But, 'shit! He was innocent this time, and he'd be damned if anyone would pin a cloner smuggling...

"Solo, shut up!" Willard's voice cut through Han's objections clearly. "I know you're a smuggler; you know you're a smuggler. Let's drop this innocent trader routine and start from the premise that it's entirely realistic for me to expect you to be guilty."

"I'm a Corellian Independent."

"Same definition. Where are the chems?"

"I said I don't have your Sithbaiting..."

"And my agents say differently! The *Falcon* flew in with 50 steles of three specific rejuv

chems from the Nery systems--"

"And I don't care what your sithshit agents say. I DON'T CARRY CLONE CHEMS!" Solo slammed his hand down on Willard's desk for emphasis, but the guards restrained him from further action. The Corellian and the commander glared at each other silently.

"I don't see why we're wasting our time with this Corellian garbage," Commissioner Brun spoke up, breaking the tense quiet. She crossed her arms and eyed Han with disdain. "I'll call the Stormtroopers; the IEB will get the information out of him fast enough."

"You'll do no such thing," Willard informed her, his attitude toward the woman as cold as his stance with Han. He had been unable to keep the news of this chem drop from Brun and he resented her involvement at what might be the decisive break in the case. Moreover, he did not want her to learn of the Sith connection; that much was still hidden from the local trooper headquarters. No, the IEB was not going to take his only in-hand evidence from him! Why, with this kind of proof, he could leak the word of Sith cloning experiments and be believed. The backlash among the Center-Worlds alone, not to mention the MiddleWorlds where the Clones had ravished most freely, would be devastating, a reaction which the Empire could ill afford before its new cloned troops were --

The commander suddenly realized that his thoughts had taken a new tack, that he was contemplating more than just cessation of a distasteful activity which he considered illegal anyway. He was now considering sabotage, perhaps treason.

Startled by his audacity, Willard gave Brun a harsher look than he had intended before returning his attention to Solo.

"My men are searching your ship right now, Captain. They have medisensors which can detect the slightest chemical trace. In a few minutes we'll all know whether you're lying or not. Why not appear to cooperate now instead of waiting for irrefutable evidence?"

The tension in Han's body disappeared instantly; his usual half-smile reappeared. "My game, Commander," he said confidently. "I'm clean. You won't even find a grain of spice in my holds; had 'em flushed for the new year."

"You're a fool, Corellian," Brun observed.

Willard ignored the comment. Something about Solo bothered the commander. He had dealt with too many pirates over the years and trusted the instincts experience had honed within him; he usually sensed a lie or bluff immediately. And, whatever else he knew about Solo and his record, Willard's gut reaction was that the Corellian *was* being honest. What had Willard's intelligence overlooked? As Commissioner Brun began to badger Solo with threats of Imperial incarceration, Willard quickly reread his agents' reports.

"Tell me about your co-pilot," he said at last, flipping off the reports before Brun could

see where this comment had come from. All she knew about Wtuv was that she had not sent troopers to the hangar in time to detain him; Willard's guards had apprehended Solo even as the squad arrived at the lower levels of the controller office. "And notice, Carlyn," Willard added in reproach, "your troopers still haven't found him."

The woman's jaw tightened, but she said nothing.

Han jumped at the opening. He had almost forgotten about Kol, so unimportant had the man become the moment Han had decided he didn't like him. "Look, Commander," he said now, "I don't know a thing about him 'cept he can fly a freighter and drive me batty in about three hours. I picked him up on Non and I dropped him the minute the *Falcon* made hangar. If that sonovabitch smuggled those chems on *my* ship, I'll get him for you. But I'm clean, you got that?"

A buzzer sounded on Willard's desk. The medisensor report was in. There *had* been clone chems on the *Falcon*, in cabin two. Willard read the data silently, then looked up at Han.

"Where would your co-pilot have hidden them?"

"He never even unpacked, just dumped his stuff in the first port cabin."

"Luggage?"

"Trunk. 'Bout 90 x 60."

Willard nodded. He addressed the guards. "Send some men out for this KolWtuv. Have all outgoing shiplists reviewed."

"I already have those troopers on him," Brun reminded Willard.

"I know. That's why I'm sending my men." When the guards seemed reluctant to leave Solo's side, Willard waved them away. "Unbind him, and don't worry. I think I can handle one Corellian."

"They have my blaster..." Han suggested carefully as the guards started to leave.

Willard nodded. The trooper detached Solo's weapon from his belt and laid it on the commander's desk. When he and his companion were gone, Willard leaned back in his chair and eyed Han speculatively.

"Now, Captain Solo, what do I do with you? Transporting proscribed substances such as clone chems is not only a serious Imperial crime, but a fairly dirty prac--"

"I wasn't transporting them!" Han interrupted. "My co-pilot was."

A look of incredulosity replaced the angry glare Commissioner Brun had leveled at Willard who stopped cold at Han's statement. He resisted a temptation to smile. Without a doubt, Corellians were the most entertaining of the galaxy's crooks. Only an Independent could employ such logic and couple it with enough bold indignations to make the guileless expression on his face seem credible.

This boy is either one of the best comen I've met in a long time, Willard thought, or he really is as innocent as he claims. The commander's sixth sense told him to go with the latter assessment. He tapped thoughtfully at the input terminal, noted that Brun was saying something unimportant, and interrupted freely.

"Carlyn, your threats are unnecessary. I'm letting the captain go." Willard barely noted the return of Brun's angry expression; he did not miss the grin that appeared on Han's face. "But," he added, "I wouldn't look so happy, Corellian. You are not exactly my idea of a preferred businessser. I expect you out of this port by nightfall, and suggest you *stay* off Mayon for quite a while. Spend your New Year's elsewhere, Solo. You may go."

Han picked up his blaster and reholstered it. His movements were slow and guarded, but when he glanced at Commissioner Brun his grin was wide with insolence. He was free again and that! to Imperial hacks who thought they could throw their weight around! He headed for the door.

"Oh, Captain Solo?"

He froze, damning all Port officials with overactive tastes for drama. What did Willard want now? "Yeah?"

The commander was almost smiling when Han faced him once more. The Maian crossed his arms and leaned forward on his desk. "I would exercise a bit more discretion in choosing my next co-pilot if I were you. Don't just pick up any starhopper with 'touch' reflexes. You're getting a little too old to pull off that innocent young rascal routine; it only worked this time because some of the facts, and my good nature, supported you."

Han hid his relief behind a crooked smile. "I'll keep that in mind, Commander," he said as he backed out of the office. *I most certainly will.*

Brun watched Han's departure from the Port complex on the wallscreen in Willard's office. "Well, he made his way out of here in record time," she commented acidly. "We should have held him."

Willard called his guard commander to assign a surveillance of Han Solo, then answered, "He's not the one we want."

"Another of your 'instinctive' decisions, Commander?"

Willard turned in his chair and regarded Brun with a deceptively gentle smile. "Yes, Commissioner," was all he said.

"He's a smuggler anyway. And an accessory. You could have cited him on that."

"I could have, and I would have lost the one person who will probably lead us to WTuv and whom-ever is doing the real smuggling. Your troopers are certainly useless for that. Corellians don't

like doublecrossers, Brun. Solo will find him."

"I don't believe in 'Corellian Honor', Commander," Carlyn said with disdain. "You would have let him go whatever."

Tired of the dialogue, Willard stood up and walked over to his window. He tried to ignore Brun's next complaints as he imagined the sounds of the Port below. None penetrated his office; the windows would not open short of some energy beam rupturing its membrane.

The commander allowed himself the childish thought that he would enjoy rupturing the smug, arrogant look he knew was on Carlyn's face as she declared that a commander with the best interests of the Empire at heart would have held Solo simply on his past record. He definitely would not do his best to make the Empire look foolish while he appeared all-wise.

Willard sighed over Carlyn's narrow, tasteless outlook. "A lawyer would have torn the case apart instantly, Brun. You're from Bestine, from a legal family; you know that we need hard evidence."

"In matters of Imperial import, lawyers are irrelevant. Even President Dahke would pledge Bestine's word to that."

"Yes, Dahke would, wouldn't he?"

"And as for evidence, Commander, we are the Empire, you and I. We do not need to be so meticulous."

"WE?!" Nik Willard turned abruptly and faced his assistant. "We?" he challenged. "Oh no, Brun, not 'we'. I am a Maian; I work for my world while under Imperial auspices. I follow Maian Words of Honor..."

"The kind of weakness that felled the Republic."

"...and you may not include me in your twisting of legal rights!" Willard realized he was shouting and forced himself to relax. "I abide by Imperial law as best I can, Carlyn; I run my Port according to its strictures. But *do not* imply I would ever cooperate with your Imperial travesties of justice!"

Try as he might, Willard could not control his anger completely. Yes, it was time to leave, to try something new, to get away from all the compromises. "I leave those games to you, dear Carlyn," he said sarcastically. "Your inclinations make you much better suited for such dealings."

Without taking her eyes off Willard, Brun picked up a few file disks, then walked to the door. She paused before the sensor could detect her. "Are you showing your true loyalties at last, Commander?" she said softly.

"My feelings on that issue have never been a secret."

"No, they haven't." She glanced away for a moment before continuing. When she looked back at

her superior, her expression was cold. "I suppose that is why the Empire is watching you. It has not been blind to such instances in the past, you know. You are too casual with our enemies. You are soft. Perhaps you are a liability. Be careful, Commander Willard. We may humor your eccentricities for the moment, but times change."

Brun stepped into the sensor path. The door opened. Half-way through the entry to the outer offices, she turned and nodded to Willard. "'I would exercise a bit more discretion...'" she quoted smoothly. "The Empire *will* be served."

A small waver of worry snaked through Willard's disgust as he watched the door shut. The silence in the room suddenly seemed as chilly as the look on Brun's face. Could he really be in danger?

He was a survivor. He believed that. He had to have been to have lived through that first terrible year when the Empire took over Mayon. His Port had been free when he began as its commander, free even when Tarkin brought the charred, barely alive body of the Sith boy to the leading cure home and commanded its healers to make him whole again. But with Tarkin had come the troopers to protect the Sith, and by the time the seasons had turned completely, Willard no longer worked for Mayon alone; the Empire had arrived.

For fifteen years, Willard had served the Port, keeping to his personal standards of honor by flowing around official obstacles, allowing them to roll away until they were lost in bureaucratic disorder. He cultivated important friends. He did his best to maintain some semblance of the old order in Port Mayon without threatening the new.

He had thought he could continue a little while longer; was he wrong? Could they be so angry with him over his insistence on handling this clone business alone? *How ironic*, he thought. He had begun his career as commander watching Maian healers rebuild Darth Vader; he would end it trying to stop the Dark Lord from building a Sith empire with clones.

The thought was chilling; he had never forgotten his grandfather's stories of the ravages of the last Sith Incursions, over seventy years ago. This would be a thousand times worse. He could be the one man...

Bah! Willard shook his head angrily. He was getting melodramatic. This was simply a case of bureaucratic jealousy. The commander defused his fear by trivializing the situation. *I've done them no harm*, he told himself. *Perhaps I'm a bit too outspoken, nothing more. Besides, not even that jackass Hudt at the IEB could feel so threatened by the simple work of a fair man.*

They would be fools to dismiss a competent, popular official like myself.

It will blow over.

Han Solo felt the warmth of Mayon's sun on his

back and praised his luck. That Commander Willard was all right. He could keep his assistant, though; Han had tasted the lifeless air of an Imperial detention cell each time she had looked at him.

The passing crowds grew more exotic as Han neared the downside of Port Mayon. His walk was light, jaunty, but his eyes sharply scanned the various beings walking by. He was looking for one face, one man. He knew Port agents were following him, but didn't care. They were quite free to take WTuv...after he finished with the bastard. All he wanted was a tenth with the man, just enough time to get even for the damage the Corellian had done to Han's self-image.

Solo had carried contraband of all descriptions before this, even off-standard spice one time when he was desperate for cash. In certain circumstances, anything was fair game. Except flotsam from the old Clone Imperium. That was one activity loathed in nearly every underworld in the galaxy. Too many old spacers bore too many scars from those wars, and the younger ones suspected from where, and how, the future troops of the Empire would appear. A very private war, completely unassociated with the elusive rebel Alliance, had been waged for many years between Imperial freighters leaving the Nery systems and the star-hoppers of the galaxy. What the civilized worlds hoped were only rumors, their renegades accepted as fact and acted upon in their own effective manner.

And long before even Willard suspected, the galaxy's outlaws had known of the independent clone smuggling. Like most spacers, Han had assumed some Imperial schemer was trying to outwit his cronies by building his own army of followers. He didn't know who was running the gig - no one did - but he would have gladly joined the mob determined to fry the offenders once they were discovered.

He still would...after he cleared himself of any involvement.

KoIWtuv had worked for Get and QenTReveno before. He knew the chance he ran in doublecrossing them. He also knew the value of the chems he held, and he had his own contacts. Let TReveno and his buddy run the risks of working for some Imperial with dreams of immortality; KoIWtuv had many friends on Mayon and his friends whispered about another, wealthier, interested party. Even as two Port Guards were guiding Han Solo through a maze of office hallways to the Port Commander's office, KoIWtuv was collecting for his valuable goods.

Unfortunately for the Corellian, his contact didn't trust doublecrossers either. The Sith killed him.

"I told you not to use Solo," Get growled to his companion. "Figures a dumbass like that'd get himself picked up."

"He got himself out, didn't he?" Qen countered. "That kid's no dummy."

The two Corellians sat in a small boardingroom not far from hangar row. They had spent most of the previous day enduring a warranted search of the *Sport* and a long questioning period by Willard's agents. Now, having finally managed to elude their Port "observers", they waited for KolWTuv and his trunk of smuggled chems.

News of Solo's capture and release came after they had waited quite a while. Qen and Get remained at their rendezvous longer still, but when Kol was over three hours late, they decided Solo must have outsmarted them.

TReveno explained it all to Get as they left the room. "Solo must have found the chems and made a deal with WTuv. They land, he sends Kol out fast before any trouble can come up. If he gets picked up, which he did and I'd like to know how they found out, he claims he's innocent to Willard..."

"Hmmpf. He's good at that."

"...and since Willard's a sucker for a good-boy act, Solo gets off. He shakes whatever tail he's got, meets WTuv somewhere..." Qen stepped out onto the street, instinctively looking up and down for any potential trouble. There was none. The two men walked on.

Qen continued. "WTuv probably has the contacts to find some Imperial wanting those chems, so we've got to find them before they make a deal. You know, what I'm surprised at is Solo." TReveno smiled slightly. "I really thought the kid was too blind, too 'honorable', to know a good deal when he saw one."

Get grunted. He had never understood all that babble about honor on Corell, much less in space. Even Qen had once followed those unspoken "rules" by which most pirates operated. Years before, he had let Solo live because of one of those conventions. Get had no use for them; that crap only got in the way, and besides, anyone with eyes could see that wasn't the way the universe was run. People like Solo knew how to get past the laws and the Imperials all right, but they didn't understand life at all.

Get thought of the Sith agents he and Qen worked for, and nodded. Now *those* people knew how to survive successfully; they understood the uses of power. Get liked the Sith; they confirmed his opinion of the true goals of existence.

"Solo's always been a punk," he said sourly as they turned a corner and headed for the entertainment streets. "I should've broken his neck back on Corell."

Begrudgingly, and for possibly the first time, Qen conceded that Get was probably right.

They walked noisily into a spacer's bar. The bartender, knowing these two well, slid a bottle of Corellian rum, Galeen Gold - 5 Star, down the bar to them. No charge. Without any acknowledgement of the token protection payment, Get palmed the

bottle, uncapped it and took a swallow, then passed it to Qen who enjoyed a drink that was a bit more generous.

Putting down the bottle at last, Qen looked around the room. No Solo. Not even one of his friends. TReveno made a slight face, then looked back at his partner.

"I'm thinking that the kid's wising up some," he said.

Get graced Qen with a withering look which TReveno could not ignore.

"Well," the captain of the pirate ship *Sport* said in a game attempt to regain a sense of control over the day's developments, "he damn well better wise up on someone else's cargo."

Mayon's cosmopolitan culture graced the planet with a delicious array of restaurants which catered to patients, their visitors and healers from throughout the Empire. Although Nik Willard often went home to share a quiet lunch with his sister, Pat, on this last day of the year, the commander felt a need to lose himself in the crowded center-port. The quiet of home would remind him too much of the quiet of his office.

Willard enjoyed a refreshing lunch of Mordani greens, complemented nicely by a cool glass of Alderaani Dustflower wine. A Vessan merchant, who supplied a number of the wealthier healing homes with the luxuries their customers could afford, recognized him, as did an Urtian who stopped by regularly for treatment of a stubborn organ transplant problem. A ship's captain from Rynan noted Willard's presence also, and though her lingering gaze seemed to invite a greeting, the commander nodded at her as politely as at the others, smiling just as cordially, no more.

His meal over, the commander began an easy amble back to his office. The midday crowd was heavy, but not pressing, and carried with it a holiday air of expectation. A galaxy-wide week of celebrations would begin tomorrow, and with the Holiday falling during Mayon's spring again this year, most of the population was preparing for out-of-door fetes.

Nik and Pat Willard planned on joining one of the countryside excursions, so Willard stopped to pick up some small pocket canisters of dried fruit for the landbus trip. He could well afford a private transport, but he and Pat had found the excitement of the New Year's crowds pleasing and so, over the years, had traveled with everyone else.

Perhaps the sense of family that being with their fellows gave them called them back each Holiday. Nik and Pat had no other relatives, no other ties. Willard had thought of settling down when younger, but the chances had all seemed to drift past him. Besides, there was Pat to care for. His sister was a kind and gentle woman, younger than he, but she was also slow, almost simple-minded. All the skills of Mayon could not give her what her

genes had not allowed. Her brother looked after her, loved her and supplemented her small earnings as an assistant in a friend's floral arrangements shop. They were content.

The oppressive mood the morning's business had built within Willard was completely forgotten as he walked away from the fruit vendor's cart. Only when a rude shove from someone in a group of shoppers nearly knocked his package from his arms did his thoughts stray from his Holiday plans.

A being in a deep blue hooded cloak whispered an apology; Willard nodded curtly at the human, then started to walk away. A hand reached out to stay him. "Commander Willard?" the soft, female voice queried.

Before Willard could turn and speak, the cloaked figure was walking next to him. She was dressed in the style of a Heildie merchant, her skin and eyes covered and shielded from Mayon's sun, but Willard knew from her accent and manner that she was no native of that dark, chilly planet.

"Please keep walking, Commander. What I have to say will not take long."

"You're no Heildie," Willard stated. "What legitimate reason do you have for that disguise?"

"I have made no effort to hide my deception from you for I want you to know it is just such. My reasons are not legitimate by our government's standards, but they are ethical. In these times, the two brothers are often sundered."

Willard looked away sharply and quickened his step. He was familiar enough with the slogans of the quixotic rebel Alliance to recognize a favorite phrase or two. He would give the woman credit for stating her prejudices from the start, but he had no interest in maintaining a conversation with a radical. Brun would be all too delighted to report that the commander had been seen with a dissident.

"I understand your concern," the woman continued, matching her pace with Willard's. "Yet our hope lies in trust, Commander. Listen to me: we have learned that you will be removed from your post. You are suspected of having Alliance sympathies."

"That's ridiculous," Willard whispered harshly. He wished the woman would go away. They began to cross the courtyard outside the Wilbay Cultural Museum. "I have never said or done anything to associate myself with the rebels. I'm a practical man, woman; I don't deal in impossibilities."

"You will be arrested outside your apartment tonight. The order stat was delivered to your assistant this noontide." The rebel messenger pressed for emphasis, then added, "We can help you escape."

By a row of open-air merchants, Willard stopped and faced the woman. He kept his manner cool; no one would guess the two to be anything but friends discussing some personal problem. "Why should they trouble me now?" he asked. "Because of that smuggler this morning? The Empire doesn't

work that fast, not even if Brun submitted her complaint immediately."

She shook her head. "I know nothing of a smuggler, Commander. We do know the order did not come through normal IEB channels. You are most familiar with your affairs; who more important than the regional governor have you angered lately?"

"No one," Willard's voice grew strained. "No one." *But the woman is right*, Willard thought worriedly. *Grand Moff Ageter always works through the IEB. This order, if true, would have had to come from Om itself, or Xet.* Willard remembered the visit the Dark Lord had made to Port Mayon only months ago, and felt that too familiar touch of fear at the thought of Sith retaliation.

The woman grabbed at Willard's hesitation. "We have all noticed your fair judgments, Commander. Your sympathies may not lie with the Alliance itself, but they do not support the Empire. Surely you must know how out of place you are among other Imperial officials of your rank. She quickly surveyed the beings who flowed past them. "I cannot stay and debate with you. Your only hope of survival, if you remain, is total submission to the Empire. I - we - do not believe you are a being capable of such hypocrisy. The choice lies before you, Commander: succumb to the Empire, or join - at least cooperate with - those who would return the old ways of the Republic to the galaxy. You have long lived in a safety zone that is rapidly disappearing, Nik Willard. Soon there will be no neutral area, no middle ground."

Willard started to turn away again. She laid her hand on his arm. "A ship leaves for Rynan, for Rylla Port, at 4500 Galactic Time. We will take you if you wish..."

"I wish you to leave me along!" Willard hissed. He pulled his arm away and hurried from the woman's presence.

"...in Hangar 039," she said after him, but Commander Willard did not hear.

Carlyn Brun studied the orders which orchestrated Willard's removal as Port Commander. She almost chuckled at the thought of the consternation they must have caused at the IEB. Colonel Veron Hudt was very jealous of his authority.

Brun tapped thoughtfully at her lips with her stylus. What was the real reason for Willard's elimination? It seemed incredible that Willard could be involved in something she knew nothing about, and nothing she did know of him truly warranted this action. At least nothing that had occurred before this morning, and her report on Willard's actions then was not yet filed. The official charge of rebel activity she had dismissed immediately; Willard was too pragmatic to indulge in such childish dreams, whatever his eccentricities. But obviously his stubborn insistence on acting as if the Republic still existed had angered someone. Carlyn eyed Willard's office door. The answer would lie in one of his private files. Dare

she investigate before his removal was accomplished?

She was not long in making her decision.

Commissioner Brun sighed in satisfaction as she reviewed the information she discovered in Nik Willard's safe file. She had gambled and won. The trouble and attention it would take to keep Willard from noticing the broken seals in his computer bank before his arrest was accomplished would be worth the reward the Sith would pay for her booty. Or maybe she would use the stolen data to purchase a place among the Sith double agents which any Imperial with intelligence knew existed, however much the Empire preferred to pretend they didn't. For a moment she had considered going to the IEB with the information, but she knew Colonel Hudt would claim the credit while she would be fortunate to escape his private henchmen with her life.

No, the path of greater power for Carlyn Brun lay with the Sith. She could contact Jehed Jacksen, Hudt's own assistant, for rumor reported he had friends among the Sith; Commissioner Petrand's loyalties were also suspect. But...no. Brun decided she was not interested in sharing her good fortune with anyone. She knew one of Vader's private staff was in town; now she understood why.



Carlyn wondered at Willard's mad courage in trying to outwit the Sith; she agreed now that the Corellian was probably innocent of any involvement. In his own way, Solo had been as obsessed with his integrity as Willard was with his. Neither was capable of understanding the Empire, let alone the Sith.

And they were fools, both of them, Commissioner Brun thought as she reprogrammed Willard's computer as neatly as possible. Power was the only negotiable coin in this universe.

Power.

Han Solo collected his lunch from streetside vendors. He was not happy, and as the afternoon wore on he became unhappier. Han had not expected to have much luck finding a partner here, but he was having one hell of a time getting anyone to even talk with him about a simple one-shot trip offplanet. He'd seen no sign of KolWTuv either, and any questions he asked about the Corellian only seemed to increase his difficulties.

Apparently word was out on his involvement with the clone smuggling and that was enough to earn Solo the cold shoulder treatment wherever he went. A couple of belligerent Dotarians had even tried to provoke a fight.

Angry, and more than a little peeved that people would think him capable of such dirty work, Han concentrated most of his energies on spreading his side of the story. A small reward for whoever could turn WTuv over to him was included to support his veracity. Han wanted more than just information on the smuggler; he wanted a witness there to prove he was not just trying to reclaim his goods.

Although Get and Qen's interest in finding both KolWTuv and Han Solo also linked them irrevocably to the clone chem smuggling, the two renegades did not have as much trouble as Han at getting folk to talk to them. It was infinitely safer to talk with Get and Qen than to refuse out of some suicidal sense of fastidiousness. Likewise, it could be profitable, for the reward they had out on either man was double Solo's.

Still, so great was the dislike for anything and anyone connected with clone smuggling that no one came forward to claim either reward. But the gossip-chain was overloaded with speculation. Who was really guilty of cloner involvement? Who was doubling whom?

Prudent spacers stayed away from Get, Qen-TReveno and Han Solo alike.

3

The galactic timepiece on Willard's desk clicked 4500 into place on its viewscreen. Usually, during as busy an afternoon as this had been,

Willard ignored, or simply didn't hear, the low-pitched chime. This time he looked up. He stared at the screen. 4500. The ship to Rynan would be leaving momentarily. The commander thought of the woman on the street. Was her warning legitimate? Willard glanced at his computer. Had the information hidden in his safe file compromised him so fatally? How had anyone found...would they really...

Brun walked into his office with yet another problem, distracting him from his brooding. *No, they couldn't know.*

Besides, I haven't done anything to actually harm the Empire, Willard thought as he glanced over the report the commissioner slid into his com-screen. So they find out and reprimand me? With my long record of service...Willard frowned slightly as he realized he could actually get demoted for his secrecy. Eh, so what? I'll quit, then. And that's the worst that could happen. They'll just figure I was scheming for a promotion, trying to use my data as leverage. Enough other people do it. Willard affixed his sigstamp to the report, then stood. You never can tell, after all. I might yet have the pleasure of watching Carlyn's face should they give me a commendation for my work instead!

His mood lightened slightly, and the commander dismissed Brun's earlier warning. *So I'm impatient, and free with my opinions. Indiscretions, to be sure, but not reasons to suspect me of rebel activity! Ridiculous!* Nik Willard decided as he followed his assistant out of the office to another meeting.

Stupid, too.

The Sith agent returned Brun's call late in the afternoon. She was not happy about leaving Willard's side, but since he had a data inspection to make at the banks on the north side of the complex, the commissioner risked the meeting.

He was tall, middle-aged and a full-blooded upper caste Sith, the personal attendant of the Dark Lord himself. Known only as Manac, he had served Darth Vader as valet when both men were just youth and boy, and had survived the purges which had left Vader without rival on Xet, days when even Spen Vader had not been exempt from his son's ambition. Now he served his master quietly, proficiently and with a deadly attention to detail.

Manac listened to the woman's proposal without expression. His size and rank insured total acceptance of his lack of manners, and when she finished her recitation, he did not even give her the satisfaction of knowing she was correct in her conclusions.

Like all Sith of his caste, Manac had been trained in the lesser powers of the Force. His Lord had brought him even more deeply into those mysteries. Now, with a subtle movement of his hand and the concentration of his thoughts, Manac captured Carlyn's sympathetic will and bade her

keep still. He rechecked the security of the room, then walked over to the quiet figure of the Imperial and stood behind her. Manac placed his large, supple hands around her neck and snapped it back. Carlyn Brun fell to the floor as silently as she had died.

The Sith removed the stolen data disks from Brun's uniform pocket. With two long steps he was at the side of the room's portacomputer. The information that passed before his eyes confirmed Sith suspicions of Willard, though the tapes gave no clue as to what he had intended to do with his treasure. Well, that was irrelevant now, Manac thought in satisfaction. As for the Corellians, it was clear that though the commander had not yet connected them to the chems, he had been on the brink of breaking the whole operation open. Willard's arrest had been ordered none too soon.

The scheme by which Get and Qen had brought the contraband to Mayon amused Manac. They had lost out on their payment, of course, for he had collected the chems from KolWTuv himself that morning, but the Sith would recommend they be retained as carriers. That boy, Ly Tron, had chosen them well; Manac considered recommending him to Vader. The fourth Corellian, the patsy, was nothing to Manac; and as the Sith placed the data disks and a transmitter charge on Carlyn Brun's body, he dismissed Han Solo and the *Falcon* from his memory.

The charge burned white under the fire from Manac's energy pistol, and the Sith looked away as its small explosion brightened the room. When the light died, he was alone again.

Now Manac allowed himself an expression of disdain. He did not like Imperial opportunists any more than starhopper doublecrossers. He left the room feeling mildly disturbed at having had to deal with the likes of Brun. Developments such as this were annoying, but demanded immediate attention. The woman would only have complicated matters; now his agents could operate freely. Willard's information would go no further; Darth Vader's interest in clone rejuvenation techniques would remain unknown.

Qen smiled at the small Redancian Hym he and Get held pinned to the alley wall. "Now, I'm going to repeat myself just one more time, Udret, so harken those antennae of yours. Where did Solo go after he told you about his co-pilot offer?"

The grey insectoid shook his head slightly, his wizened face even more wrinkled than normal from fear. The Hymns of Redant were the artisans of their planet; they had none of the natural body weapons such as flangeclaws or legspurs as did their fellow spacebound race, the Orths. The vestigial stinger at the bottom of Udret's lower back was little more than a curious atavism; it had lost its utility when the race became upright. Though tiny glands still produced a stunning poison at the barb's base, it was impossible to inflict a wound upon assailants when they were humans twice your size and when they held you spread out, a full meter off the ground, against an alleyway wall.

Udret knew he was too valuable a gossip-chain relay for the Corellians to kill; he also hoped the favors he had done in the past for the two would elicit some sympathy from them, though the chance for such consideration seemed negligible. Get was threatening to bend his finger-like flanges backward till they snapped off if he didn't talk; as the twirphon player with a saloon combo that played the seedier bars of the galaxy, Udret needed his flanges.

"Zzzz, he said he was taking...Zzzz! You are hurting me, Corzell'n! He iz taking nourizhment! I don't know where!"

"Truth?" Get murmured, still keeping a firm grip on the Redancian's long, fragile flanges.

"Truth!"

Dismissing the insectoid from their attention immediately, the humans let him drop to the ground and scurry off.

"Well," Qen said after a moment of thought, "that narrows it down some. I think I can pretty well guess where the kid'll stop." As they left the alley, he commented casually, "Solo's usually the flashiest spacer this side of Center, but why is it when we want to find him, he disappears like a..." Qen's voice faded as the Corellians disappeared into the streetside crowds.

Strange, Nik Willard thought as the citybus he rode waited for the cross-street traffic to pass. Half of me is too nervous to move while the other half is so cool...

Mayon's highest ranked Port Commander stared ahead at the upcoming stop, the last before his. He had gone back to his office after Carlyn left. His inspection could wait; he wanted to check through his files to see where something might have gone wrong. He remembered sitting at his desk, stunned at the evidence of expertly broken and expertly repaired seals.

Every file on the Sith smuggling operation was gone.

Two women appeared in Willard's mind, the mysterious rebel messenger...and Carlyn Brun.

Carlyn -- who had suddenly left for an unexpected, unexplained meeting.

Two messages. Separately he could discredit them; together their import was undeniable. Informing his secretary that he would be in the north Complex the rest of the day, Nik Willard had walked from his office for the last time.

His plan of action was simple, barely more than an instinctive reaction. First he would go home and get some of their belongings. Then brother and sister would leave Mayon. Though his remaining moments of freedom were limited, there was still time enough to find a ship departing within the measure. And they would certainly not

suspect his absence until after 6000 if what the rebel woman had said was true: that they were waiting till day's end to arrest him.

Willard left the transport one stop early. From this angle, the walk to his apartment would take him down a heavily treed court; he could see the small building before anyone there might spot him. Willard hoped he was right in thinking the Imperials would not have arrived yet. But he had to be careful.

By a flowering cernon tree, Nik Willard stopped and watched three beings he knew to be Imperial agents walk Pat Willard down the front stairs of their apartment building to a waiting transport.

Willard stood very still as the agents boarded the minibus after his sister. The small vehicle floated away from the scene at a leisurely speed; the remaining officers lounged or wandered in the vicinity with like ease. There was no need to excite the neighbors, or tip off the unsuspecting Port Commander expected in a half-measure or so.

How well they planned it! They even knew Pat had been given the day off to prepare for the holiday. Willard leaned against the tree. He felt very helpless. What do I do now?

The woman at the square had said the rebels thought him worth protecting. *Where was that ship going?* Willard thought a moment. *Rynan, that's it.*

Good enough choice, he conceded. The planet's known for its liberal culture. Senator Faffston is outspoken enough and the Academy enjoys immunity.

But perhaps he should go elsewhere. Willard thought of Alderaan for a moment. Senator Bail Organa's feelings toward the Empire were common knowledge; speculation as to whether the Viceroy could safely maintain his place in the Senate much longer had been high among Willard's political associates, and the general consensus had been negative. *And he hates the Sith particularly, Willard remembered. He's never forgiven Darth Vader, or Lex Tarkin, for the destruction of the Jedi Enclave there.*

Alderaan or Rynan? Both would be sympathetic to someone accused of rebel sympathy, both were large enough to have resisted the kind of Imperial surveillance which made hiding difficult, and both were sophisticated enough to offer him options...

Pat. Willard's plans of escape halted. Pat has no options. Her brother stared down the avenue, his eyes wide, hoping his tears would drain away and leave his sorrow undetected. No one to rescue you, sweet, innocent lady. No stern Republican lawgiver, no mysterious and bold Jedi Knight. There's no one to help, Pat. Why, they used to come to me, ME, for justice. And I'm no good for you now.

Willard knew he had to go. Perhaps if they never found him, the IEB would release Pat before she completely understood the situation and thus became a liability. Surely they would see she

posed no threat to them!

As for himself, the rebel Alliance seemed his only hope short of turning renegade completely and losing himself amidst the outlaws of the galaxy. Willard found it difficult to muster any enthusiasm for either course of action. He was no outlaw, and though he was sympathetic to the Alliance's dreams, that's all they were - whilltales for children. Individuals like himself might still live by the old order, but the glories and the wonder of the Republic were gone; the galaxy was forever changed. Something, some kind of innocence, had been lost, and he was too old to believe in magic once again.

Willard walked away from the cernon tree, back toward the transport stop. He would go to the hangars directly. Despite Year's End, he was sure he could find a ship leaving soon, and stopping by the controller's office should not be dangerous. He hoped.

The citybus rolled to a stop and he boarded. He also hoped no one would ask why the Port Commander wanted to...the Corellian! Hadn't he told Solo to leave this evening? If the boy was still in port, if he still lacked a co-pilot...Willard nodded to himself in satisfaction as the bus glided toward the center and the downport area beyond. Solo would be an excellent cover. Who would suspect a Port Commander with such a known hatred of clone smuggling to leave with a prime suspect? Who would think that suspect would tolerate such an enemy's presence?

The krisdeer steak at Sheb's Place was good, but Han found himself losing interest in it. He scowled at the Kresseno who sat opposite him.

"You're sure about Qen and Get?" Han asked, obviously irritated.

"Yeah," the golden skinned man confirmed. "And their reward for turning you in to them beats yours for a new pilot. Look, I don't think you have to worry about that happening. Everyone's pretty much figured out what happened and figures you're straight and..."

"Haven't Get and Qen figured out what happened? Hasn't anyone told them I'm looking for WTuv, too?"

The Kresseno spread his hands in a gesture of futility. "Who talks to Get 'n Qen if they can avoid it? Besides, some folk think they've finally gone too far with this chem business."

"Yeah? I don't see anyone doing anything about it other than avoiding them."

"Han, we *are* talking about Get 'n Qen."

Solo pushed his plate away. He wasn't hungry any more. "'Shit. If those two think I've pulled a fast one, they'll be after my...Damn! They are really getting annoying, Gieto!"

Running a hand through his dark wavy hair,

Gieto laughed in disbelief. "Han, only you could have ended up with those two as personal curses, and only you would have the crazy nerve to just call them 'annoying'. Solo, one of these days they are going to fry your ass."

"Well," Han dropped some coins on the table, "not this time, friend. I'm splitting for Ustella. You going to the Rendezvous?"

The Kressano shook his head.

"See you on Commenor, then, Gieto. Thanks for the news." With a nod, Han left the diner and headed back to the hangar where the *Falcon* was waiting.

No one had visited the *Falcon* since unloading, according to the downport controller. Willard first thought to wait for the young Corellian at the hangar, then dropped the idea; Solo might not return for hours. He decided instead to find the smuggler himself.

Willard ignored the curious looks he received as he began a search of the downport bars and grills. Let them wonder! As he stood on a street corner, thinking about where to go next, Willard was startled to see one of his own men walking his way. Their meeting was unavoidable, so to disarm the encounter of any unwanted questions, Willard spoke up first.

"Well, Stace! What are you doing on your own? I thought I sent both you and Cardin out to follow Solo."

Stace's expression of surprised changed quickly to puzzlement. "Uh, right, Commander. And we had him again, too, but Commissioner Pertrand saw us and told us to go back. He said you had the smugglers already and just to file the reports before going on Holiday. What's up, Commander?"

Willard stared at the man, hoping his expression did not betray the fright he felt at Stace's words. One more piece of the smuggling puzzle slipped neatly into place with the realization that Pertrand knew about the arrest. He *had* to know to so brazenly order Willard's men around without orders himself.

Pertrand's involvement confirmed Willard's suspicion that his arrest warrant came from the Sith. Like Jehed Jacksen at the IEB, Pertrand was an Agent, an officer newly come to Port Mayon after serving under Lex Tarkin, now Grand Moff of the outlying territories. And Tarkin of Aguens worked hand in glove with Darth Vader; his men would give their loyalty first to him, then Vader, and only then to the Empire.

Pertrand could be downport simply to round up Willard's men and get them out of the way before action was taken, or he could be here because they had already moved and were looking for their missing victim. Willard felt very cold as he clasped Stace's arm in what he tried to make a casual gesture of comradeship.

"Nothing to worry yourself about, Stace," he said lightly. "You know how complicated these things get. Go ahead, file your report and clock in. No need to even remember you saw me here."

The frown on Stace's face belied his nod. "Commander..."

"Go on, Stace. Have a good Holiday." Willard began to turn away. "Oh, Stace," he said suddenly, "where was Solo when you last saw him?"

"Sheb's Place, sir. 'Bout four blocks over east. A Corellian diner."

"Thank you, Stace. Thank you very much."

Get walked out of the main dining room of the Jesseran-style restaurant into the entry-way. He shook his head at Qen who waited outside the lounge, eyeing every being who passed by. TReveno shrugged and nodded toward the door.

As the Corellians left, they saw the Port Commander heading their way. They quickly ducked into the crowd. Qen allowed himself a fast look over his shoulder to check on Willard, but the commander was lost amid the jostling spacers.

"That was close," Qen muttered. "Maybe we should have kept our mouths shut about WTuv and Solo. Do you think he recognized us?"

Get shook his head. "Doubt it. Looked caught up in something. Where to next?"

"Sheb's Place."

At the first corner he turned on his way to Sheb's Place, Commander Willard came face-to-face with Commissioner Pertrand. The Port officials stared in mute surprise at each other, the Aguent obviously the more confused of the two.

"Ah, Commander," Pertrand said at last. "I didn't expect -- I mean, how unusual to run into you this side of the Port."

With an off-hand laugh he didn't feel, Willard made the same observation about Pertrand.

"Ah, yes," the Aguent agreed, "but with the holiday coming up, you know, it does well to check out the celebrations planned for this district. Does tend to get a bit rough."

"Of course." Willard knew such a duty was far removed from the man's area of authority and wondered at the silly lie; how stupid did Pertrand think he was? "I'm here on a similar taster myself. You realize, of course, that the smuggling rate's risen this last fifth. I wanted to check a few things before I took off for the week." There. He could play this ridiculous game as well.

The commissioner had taken a deeper breath at

the word 'smuggling'. Yes, Pertrand was with the Sith, not the Imperials. Willard then remembered that Pertrand had left the Complex after lunch, listing downport as his destination. To make his contact with WTuv? Willard realized he didn't really care; all he worried about now was how long it would take the commissioner to get back to the Complex and report their meeting.

"I really must go, Commander," Pertrand said. "I - I do want to make my report before the staff leaves the Complex."

"Of course. After the holiday then, Pertrand."

"Hmmm. Yes. After the holiday."

Willard watched Pertrand walk away. He had to find Solo - fast. Not even that Frielen ship he had thought to use as back-up would serve him now. It left in over a quarter-measure; he had to get off Mayon within the tenth. Damn their timing, choosing the day before New Year's when nearly all ships were berthed for the week!

Commissioner Pertrand suddenly cut across the street, heading for a comlink kiosk. Willard didn't stop to think. He bolted from his place and raced across the transportway, pushing past slower beings with frantic abandon.

The tackle was clumsy, but effective. Willard and Pertrand fell against the kiosk together, then rolled into the street. Of the two, Willard was the larger, but Pertrand had the advantage of youth.

Their tussle attracted the casual attention of passers-by, not because such attacks were uncommon -- they weren't in this part of the Port -- but because of the awkward combat style and the uniforms which marked them as Port officials. If a few of the spectators recognized Willard, they said nothing; they probably also recognized Pertrand, for his visits downside were common and, as Willard guessed, his business here was often related more to Sith activities than to Port concerns.

Sheb's Place was only three alleys from hangar row and as Han ambled down the middle way, he thought over various plans of action should the bait he'd placed for a co-pilot not work, leaving him with no partner come departure time.

The Port tails who had found Solo again had dropped him again soon after. *Maybe they found WTuv, Han thought. Bet he'll squeal on Get and Qen. If he does, that'll put the 'nacks on their case and clear my name completely. Wonderful. I could call Willard then, cry about it being Holiday and all and no pilots available, and maybe he'll give me the next day or two - maybe the whole week! - in port. Damn shame to miss the Rendezvous, but, Han sighed in resignation, that's the life.*

He heard the footsteps beyond a turn in the alley, but dismissed the shuffling sounds and quick, nervous steps as unrelated to him. They fit no pattern he was familiar with, especially not Qen

who always walked with a lazy, loping stride, or Get who was never heard until he stood in front, or what was more usual, behind you.

Of course, Han's experiences with the two men had never included any time when Get was down in spirit, or TReveno was uneasy, two frames of mind which accurately described the older Corellians at this stage of their search.

"Now, who have we here?" Qen exclaimed in a surprised yet pleased voice as Han turned the corner, his attention still lost in his plotting. Get perked up also as he quickly positioned himself to the side and just to the back of Solo.

"'Shit," Han said, mostly to himself, "misjudged again."

Only a misstep allowed Willard the victory in his fight. As Pertrand ducked a blow, he miscalculated the drop of an alley step behind him and fell, hitting his head against the cornerblock of a building. He dropped to the ground senseless, blood from a deep gash on his skull staining his grey-white tunic.

Breathing heavily, Willard stared at Pertrand's body. A finger poked him in the back. "Hey, 'hack, don't just stand there. Somebody's bound to call the troops."

The commander straightened at the sound of the voice. The spacer was right. He must not give in to the shock. He should walk away slowly, calmly, staring straight ahead as if completely uninvolved with the man lying so still a few feet behind him.

This is incredible, Nik Willard thought as he tried to follow the advice. The friendly spacer paced him, glancing at him in frank curiosity, but Willard ignored the being. I can't keep this up. I can't. Tracking downporters is one thing; I couldn't live like this.

Within the orderly patterns of his life, Willard could feel the realities of the day's event crashing about, destroying the designs he had built throughout the years. *Renegade!* wrecked his career. *Murderer!* slammed through the neat confines of his shame. For a moment, he rebelled against the last accusation. *You don't know Pertrand's dead,* he reminded himself. *He's young...a blow on the head...*

But he might be, a mocking voice seemed to answer. *This is the life you have to face now,* it said. *You are a part of the underground, Nik Willard, and it has its own morality.*

No! Willard shook his head, oblivious to the puzzled look the spacer gave him. *No. I couldn't live like this,* he thought again. *I'm not like Solo or the others. I'm not that untouchable.*

Despair joined the pressure of action, slowing both Willard's will and walk. *One day, just one day, and Pat's gone, my career, my home, my...life. I don't even know if I've killed a man. I don't*

know...I don't understand... Willard felt the trembling begin in his belly, but he kept it from his hands, fighting his emotions in an effort to retain some small glimmer of dignity.

He had to find Solo. The Corellian would be able to handle...

"Here come the troopers!"

The commander's tightly checked panic broke loose at the shout. He sagged against an information post at the street corner. It was over. Someone had called the local squad, perhaps identified him. He was finished. Willard's optimism failed him completely.

The spacer who had spoken earlier eyed him curiously. It began to remove its work-stained jacket as it mumbled, "Wizards, 'hack! What are you waiting for now?"

"What?"

"I said, 'what are you waiting for?'" The Onogan brushed a few loose scales from the inside of the jacket, then held it out to Willard. "Here, take this. Those white dingos will spot that uni a mile off. Give me your tunic and run for it. This way you'll have a chance and I can have your piece remade."

In a daze, Willard undid the tunic fasteners, retrieved a stylus and a notepad from his pockets, and exchanged the silver-grey garment for the deep purple wrap-around offered to him. When he had put the ragged jacket on, the Onogan winked a faceted eye at him and slapped his arm.

"Go on, run for it. Give 'em a good chase. I'll try 'n trip a few for you."

The sounds of the squad's chasetrot, the clatter of plastiform against plastiform, was closer now. Willard shook off his amazement and managed a smile. "Thanks, 'hopper," he said. "Thanks."

Then he ran.

Han ducked Qen's first punch and shoved his elbow into the Corellian's abdomen as he rolled into TReveno's body, knocking him off balance. The trick was a sophisticated version of one he had pulled on Qen as a boy, and just as effective. TReveno fell back with a grunt.

Just as Qen never seemed to remember Han's fondness for that move, Solo always seemed to forget about Get's part in the familiar scenario. The blond grabbed at Solo's shirt, grasped the collar and pulled Han back into his powerful arms. Han squirmed out of the deadly hold, then countered with a short punch to Get's midsection. The blow had little effect. Solo held his own against Get a moment or two longer, but as in each past confrontation between the Corellians, Get at last pinned Han's arms fast and presented him to TReveno for more leisurely punishment.

Han made one last try to break free. Qen stopped the effort with a sharp jab to Solo's jaw, his crystopaz ring leaving its mark as it cut deeply into Han's chin.

Qen wiped the blood from the gash with his hand, then wiped his hand on his jeans. "Sorry about that, kid," he said with amusement. "I like my corpses clean." He looked the younger man over and shook his head. "Han, I'm beginning to think I am going to have to kill you after all."

Han said nothing; he had learned to keep his mouth shut around QenTReveno long ago. The man's genial manner could disappear instantly, transformed by an unwise word into genial sadism. Six months ago, Qen had come close to pulling Han's arm out of its socket over an ill-timed noise of disgust when the *Sport* tried to boost the *Falcon's* cargo outside Ves. This time Han was determined to hold onto his temper long enough to escape in working condition.

"We shoulda killed him years ago," Get growled, tightening his hold on Han's arms for emphasis. Han snarled back, but still said nothing.

Looking away, weary of hearing that from Get, Qen seemed a model of patience. "Now, Han," he said pleasantly, "all we want are the chems. I'm not even going to ask you about WTuv. We'll find him ourselves and fry the bastard."

"If you're going to kill me, Qen, why should I tell you?"

Qen crossed his arms and assumed a pose which reminded Get of a father about to deliver an instructional lecture. *Blast!* he thought. *Is Qen going off on his "let's sign Solo up" act again?*

"All right. I'll explain it to you, Han. We hired Kol. He crossed us. People cross us; people get burned. We want everyone to understand that. You, on the other hand, simply saw a good thing and cut yourself in. That I can understand. I don't like it, but I understand it." A smile came to Qen's lips. "I may yet let Get kill you, Han; he's been wanting to for years. But maybe I won't. You're a sharp trader, kid; why should we fry such a good source of cargoes? As a matter of fact, you're so smart for a Delta boy, I'll repeat that offer I've made before..."

"Not again Qen!" Get objected.

"SHUT UP, GET!" Qen's voice snapped. For the better part of a minute, intense fury distorted TReveno's face into a child-man's mask of wild indignation and violence. Han had seen such tempers before, but never directed at Get. The other Corellian did not seem surprised, but Solo did not miss the tightening of the muscles in the arms that held him so securely. Perhaps an unexpected opportunity to rid himself of both Qen and Get was here.

The spell seemed to pass as quickly as it had come. The color drained from Qen's face and when his attention returned to Han, however cold his eyes might be, QenTReveno was smiling again.

"As I said, we could use a good man like you; I told you that ten years ago. But you're not a kid anymore, Han. You've got to start taking my offers more seriously."

Somehow, Willard kept ahead of the troopers. He skidded around the corner by Sheb's Place and grabbed one of the restaurant's customers as he walked out the door. The young Jesseran reacted angrily, but Willard didn't seem to notice.

"Quick!" he shouted at the gaudily dressed human. "Is Han Solo in there? I have to know!"

"Why? What's it worth to you, old man?"

"Damn it, answer me! There are troopers coming!"

The man's yellow eyes widened with fear and he jerked his arm from Willard's grip. The commander grabbed at his shirt instead. "Is he in there?"

"Let me go, you crazy! No, he isn't in there. He left, maybe half a tenth ago."

Willard released the man and ran for the alleys behind the restaurant.

Han's attempt to hold his temper in line failed. The "deal" TReveno was offering him was too much; he had visions of Qen telling people he, Han Solo, had actually considered joining that band of cutthroats. The time had come to disillusion Qen about their relationship once and for all. And maybe, if he got Qen and Get fighting over him...

"You don't know me yet, do you, Qen?" Han sneered. "Get's smarter than you after all. Do you really want to know what I think of your lousy deal and all the lousy trouble you've caused me with this clone rap?"

The smile faded from QenTReveno's lips. "No," he said sarcastically. "But I've got a feeling you're going to tell me anyways."

"Damn right."

Han kicked at Qen's groin. Get, as mindful of Solo's muscle tension as Han had been of his, jerked the younger pirate back. Qen instinctively danced away at the sudden movement, avoiding the full force of the kick as Han's boot slid by his thigh.

Well, Han thought, it was a good try. The idea was clear. Time, now, to capitalize on Get's quickness.

"Hell, Qen, I don't know what you'd do without Get around to save your ass. Ought to let him be the boss; he's wanted to for years."

Han had planned to duck the fist aimed for his face, hoping Qen would land the blow on Get instead,

but TReveno pulled the punch at the last moment and stepped back to study his prey.

Qen stood very still. Although his body was still tense, and the expression in his eyes matched the look he had given Get in his earlier fit of temper, TReveno appeared lost in thought.

He had been wrong about the boy - no, he had to watch that - about the man. Get had been right all along. Staring at Han Solo ten years after their first meeting in a downport on Corell, Qen-TReveno knew the time for congeniality was past. It was time to eliminate this noisesome bit of competition - permanently.

"Solo," Qen said softly, with just the slightest smile, "you talked me into it." He drew his blaster and aimed it at Han's face. "You just bought your passage to World's End, kid. Let him go, Get."

"Hold it, Trev," Get said, suddenly alert.

"Why the hell..."

"Shut up and listen!"

All three Corellians were very quiet. They heard the usual sounds of the Port, a distant ship blasting off -- *Planet-hopper*, Han identified irrelevantly -- music and cheers a few streets over as someone began holiday festivities early, and the steady, chilling sounds of troopers' chasetrot combined with the frantic footsteps of someone running very hard.

With a clatter as he nearly tripped over a storage container, Nik Willard turned the corner of the alley and began to race toward the Corellians. "Troopers!" he shouted.

Qen blinked once before he realized at whom he was staring. "Starfields! It's the Port Commander! Run!" he cried as he spun away from the scene. Get shoved Solo away from him, his great strength tumbling Han into a pile of alley trash, and sprinted after Qen.

"I thought you said he hadn't recognized us!" TReveno shouted at his partner as they made the corner away from Willard and headed for the crowded and anonymous streets of downport. Get's answer was inaudible.

Recognizing Solo immediately, Willard hardly noticed the two other Corellians. Barely stopping, he grabbed Han's arm, dragged him to his feet and began to pull him down the alley.

Still a bit startled by the sudden turn in events, Han began to protest.

"Those troopers aren't *with* me," Willard explained with a touch of exasperation. "They're *after* me!"

No further explanation was needed.

4

At the first turn, Han assumed command of the get-away. "No, not to the hangars," he scolded as he pulled Willard down an alley leading back toward the business streets. "We'll lose 'em in town."

"We have to get off Mayon!" Willard countered.

"Later, Commander, later! Right now, we gotta shake those whiteys."

"You don't understand! I can't wait!"

"You're damn right I don't understand!" Han said as he pushed Willard down a circular stairs shaft. Hidden in the dark of the deep landing was an old, unused entry. Alternating his attention, Willard watched both the top of the shaft for white plastic feet and the way Han expertly worked the hidden locks and security beacons on the door.

"I don't know what the hell's going on," Han commented as the entryway opened and he pulled Willard into the darkness beyond it, "or why I'm in the middle of it, but the story damn well better be a good one."

The first faint sound of the squad could be heard coming down the alley as the door closed quietly behind them, its locks fully activated once again. They listened to the Stormtroopers run past the stairwell and into the street beyond.

Han shook his head in amazement. "That was close, Commander. Too close. They shouldn't've even known we came down this way. You're going to have to run faster if you want to be an outlaw." He leaned against the door. "You still fired up about getting to the hangars?"

Taking advantage of the temporary security the dark provided, Willard worked at calming down, at thinking once again. *You came to Solo for a reason*, he reminded himself. *The boy lives every day of his life this way; he knows the best way to get out. Listen to him.* "Yes," Willard said aloud.

Han sighed. "Okay. But not a word till I say, understand? I'll get you there, but not by any way you've ever gone before."

The series of cavernous rooms through which Willard found himself being led appeared to spread below whole city blocks. Only the dimmest shadow-makers lit the piled crates and loose goods stacked about in the darkness, but Willard quickly recognized where he was. Port Mayon's ex-commander laughed ruefully to himself. He wondered how long this particular smuggler's cache had existed and who was being paid off to keep his mouth shut about it. Not that it mattered now, of course.

"Here we are," he heard the Corellian say at last. They had come to another door, but Han made no move to open it. Solo crossed his arms and leaned against the entryway. "All right. Let's hear it. Why are Stormtroopers chasing the Port Commander all over the city?"

"I was in a fight. I may have killed a man."

Solo thought that over. "That's an awfully short story, Com--Uh, are you still a commander?"

"I doubt it."

"Hmmp. Well, we're just under south hangar row now. Up there, people'll spot you right away."

"I don't think that's a problem yet. It's what, about 6000?"

"Yeah, sounds right."

"There's still time then."

"For what?"

"We're leaving Mayon. Now."

"We?"

"You and me, Solo, on the *Falcon*."

Han wiped at his chin; the deep cut was still bleeding a bit. "Look, Commander, Willard, whatever you're called now. I don't really understand this trouble you're in, and I know I don't understand how it involves me. But I don't have a co-pilot yet, and until I do, I'm going nowhere."

"I'm your new pilot." Willard's voice had regained its usual composure. "Your payload this trip is your freedom. I'm the only reason you're still on the streets. Once they put someone else in my place, they'll stamp down on you so hard you won't see daylight again for years -- if ever, should Carlyn Brun succeed me."

Willard realized he was taking a chance with that claim; for all he knew, Solo might already know the search for the chems had been called off. He had great faith in the ability of the underworld gossip-chain to know more than he ever would about the workings of his own port.

When Han said nothing, Willard tried again. His second angle was not written in the rulebooks of the Empire, but in the bylaws of the loose social unit known as the Corellian Pirates. "You owe me, Solo; twice over. I kept you out of the detention cells when I could have easily turned you over to the IEB, and I stopped those two friends of yours from blowing your head off."

Han considered the claims made on him. He had always made it a point to pay his debts. He asked where Willard was headed.

"Rynan. Rylla Port."

"I'm in trouble there."

"How bad?"

"Procedure violations, causing a disturbance. I was running a short-hop gambling set-up out of the hangar."

"Nothing worse than that?"

"Ah," Solo paused, as if reconsidering how much to tell the Maian. "It *is* a kinda bad time for me to go back there. They'd still recognize the ship."

Willard shook his head, puzzled.

"I had someone change the sector registry on the *Falcon*," Han explained reluctantly. He shrugged. "I figured to fly clear of Rynan for a while. Let 'em forget, put on some new men, sneak the ship..."

Willard raised his hand to stop Han. The Corellian's deceptions would complicate things, but...He sighed, "I'll fix it."

"Really?" Han wiped at his chin; smiling seemed to make it bleed more. He made a face as the cut stung sharply.

Rynan. Han considered. Not a bad place to pick up a co-pilot, what with the Academy there and all. That character I signed on during the flying casino fiasco was one of the more promising candidates for partner-status...until he got himself blown away in that fight on Ustella. And if Willard can fix things... Han calculated quickly. Rynan was a fairly short hop from Mayon, and Ustella a reasonable distance beyond there. He could still make the Rendezvous, albeit a little late.

"They, the troopers, wouldn't by any chance know where you're going?" Han asked.

"I overheard their radio calls. They have no idea who I am, but the centroller will soon be notified of the warrant anyway. We have to go *now*."

"Okay, Commander. You're on. Um, wait here a minute." The Pirate disappeared into the gloom. Willard heard some rummaging and soon found a new wrap/round jacket being tossed at him. "Here, put this on. That mess you're wearing looks too suspicious. Han waited until Willard had changed, then opened the outside door. "Let's go."

Colonel Veron Hudt clasped his hands behind his back and stared out the window of the Port Commander's office. He was tall, even for an Aguent, with that race's sharp features and high crested skull. His assistant, Jacksen, a worrisome fellow newly assigned from duty in the outlying territories, was likewise from Aguens. Though the Bureau's founder, Lex Tarkin, had moved up in the Imperial hierarchy, his legacy of an all-Aguent command in the Imperial Enforcement Bureau continued.

Hudt did not trust his assistant, though, or anyone from Tarkin's regime in the outer rim. The governor was ambitious, and he dallied too much with the Sith. Far too much. But, there was little Hudt could do about Tarkin, or Jacksen for that matter. Hudt felt the ulcer within his gut stir. He hated this evidence of his weakness within the upper realms of the IEB and he hated Jehed Jacksen for taking advantage of it.

"I still say, wait," the colonel insisted, angry that he felt the need to explain his actions to a subordinate, disgusted with himself because he knew his fear of Jacksen's connections would make him give in to that need. "Willard has no idea we're coming for him. He's probably still in the building. I want this arrest handled correctly; there are still people in the outer offices, people very loyal to the man."

"I hope you're correct, Colonel. Still, shall I issue a cautionary to the border ships? After all, our superiors will expect us to anticipate every contingency."

"I wouldn't alarm anyone if I were you, Jacksen," Hudt snapped. "Our orders also state that this news is to be released through proper channels with the proper publicity. You're entirely too eager. Mistakes can be personally costly in our business; remember that." Satisfied with his rebuke, Colonel Hudt walked back to Willard's desk. "Have you found Carlyn Brun yet? I prefer to have her here when we collect his files. I'm sure she knows how to get past his locks safely." Hudt smiled wolfishly. "After all these years I am looking forward to seeing what Old Nik has hidden away. He kept a great deal from us, Jacksen; I'm not unhappy to see him go."

"I'm certain you're not, Colonel," Jehed Jacksen agreed with a similar smile. "As for Commissioner Brun," he lied, "I don't know where she is."

The centroller didn't know why the Port Commander was visiting him again this late on Year's End, especially when he was obviously dressed to leave on Holiday. The man didn't really care. He only hoped Willard would once more not spot how far behind he was on some of the data displays shining on the comscreens in the corner of the office.

But Willard didn't appear to notice, and the centroller relaxed. Could he readjust his schedule to get this Corellian ship off-planet immediately? Sure he could. No problem, sir, really, what with the holiday and all. He gave the commander an eager smile and opened the hangar bays as he fed the clearspace coordinates into the computer.

"Any special reason for this departure, sir?" he asked in an off-hand manner, with the hope the question would keep Willard away from those comscreens.

"As a matter of fact, yes. I don't want him around the Port, particularly at Holiday, and, apparently, the only way to make that clear to the scoundrel is to escort him out. Let Kriel have him; we don't want him here."

Kriel was nowhere near Rynan; in fact, it was a dramatic overshoot away from their destination. Perhaps dropping the name would confuse and mislead any pursuers. Willard hoped so. At least it would give the centroller something to tell the IEB when it finally made its way here.

"All set, Commander."

"Good." Willard walked through the doorway. "Oh, by the way, Fields," he said, pausing just outside the office, "I would see to those data displays soon; Holiday or no, a late turn-in will look bad on your sheet."

The centroller took a breath, then assured Willard he would see to it right away. Willard smiled and waved. At the elevator, he glanced back. Fields was busy at the data displays making up time. He wouldn't notice when two men, one a Corellian and one looking suspiciously like Port Commander Nik Willard crossed the hangar 09 screen on their way to the waiting *Falcon*.

"I thought you said you could pilot!" Han Solo shouted at Nik Willard as he reached across the Maian to correct a pitched lever.

"I can!" Willard shouted back. "This is the craziest board I've ever seen! What have you done to this ship?!"

"Look, she hits .3 past light like a cruiser, and when I get through with her, she'll - Damn it! Watch that stabilizer!"

The wobbly blast-off was successful despite the shouting, though having to watch Willard's console nearly as much as his own kept Han from setting Rynan's coordinates into the navicompt till the *Falcon* was well past Mayon's moons.

"Just don't touch anything!" Solo ordered as he slipped back to the comp seat. "This will take a few minutes."

Willard made a gesture to indicate he wouldn't touch a thing, then leaned his chin on a fist. Neither the Academy training he had received thirty years ago, nor his experience during the Clone Wars had prepared him for a thing like this.

A comlink light blinked on, indicating an incoming message. Without thinking, Willard wearily flipped it on.

"Border patrol to freighter, mark 07:85:11. Acknowledge."

"I thought I told you..!" Han reached over to the transmit switch. "Yeah, that's us. What'dya want?"

"State your crew, cargo and destination," the voice recited.

"What the hell for?! What is this?! I've got a legal departure from Port Mayon and I don't have to answer any questions from any border ship that just gets curious. Stat me your warrant and I might reconsider, providing I'm still around!"

Willard stared at Solo. Did he talk back to Imperial ships like this all the time? How *had* he survived so far? A new voice came over the comlink and as it spoke, Willard saw Solo relax.

"Is this the *Falcon*? Han, is that you?"

"No, it's the watergod of Skylan. What's up, Larex, and what are you doing this close to civilization?"

"Looking for rebels, Han. Don't suppose you have any hidden away in your holds, do you?"

Han laughed. Even after he looked suddenly at Willard, a suspicious understanding creeping into his eyes, the laugh remained. "Rebels? You mean those spacecrazies who keep taking potshots at you boys? You gotta be kidding, Lar. I'm insulted. Why would I..."

"Right, right, Han," the voice of Larex interrupted. "Stupid questions, but I have to ask. Look, I *do* have a bit on the fisch that says you're supposed to fly clear of Mayon for a while. From the old man himself. You aren't planning on heading back here any time soon, are you? I'd hate to have to burn a hotdog like you out of the sky."

"Larex, believe me. This Corellian has had his fill of Mayon for quite a while. You'll have to find your fun somewhere else. Hey, numbers coming up on my comp, buddy. Gotta go. Nice talking. Hope you find your rebels."

"So do I, Han. I could use the bonus. Border out."

Willard cleared his throat when Han broke the contact. "You know many Imperials that well?"

Solo shrugged. "Just a few, here and there. A person's gotta get past those warrants somehow. I saved that guy's life, and his ass, with his captain, once; he owes me a whole lot of points. Now, do you think you can at least handle the hyperspace jump if I point out a few changes I've made?"

"You cannot have jerryrigged the jump system *that* much, Han."

"Yeah, well, watch anyway, will you?"

The *Falcon* took the jump smoothly. Han leaned back in his seat and pursed his lips; Willard sat quietly next to him, staring at the blackness around them. "All right," Solo said suddenly. "What's this about rebels?"

Willard blinked. He and Pat should have been packing for their country trip right now, and yet, here he sat, in some pirate's starship while she... They would have missed him by now, would be wondering where he was. Would they credit him with the imagination to have left with the departing Corellian? Were they after him right now? Would they let Pat go?

The Maian brought his thoughts back to the cockpit. He shook his head. "I'm not a rebel," he said simply. "Why do you think they would look for me as a rebel? I told you, I killed a man."

"And I told you that was a pretty short story. I could buy the rebel bit faster than the murderer routine."

"It's better for you to know I'm not a rebel."

Han considered that. "You're right. I'm better off transporting an upperclass murderer than a rebel. Crazy universe." He began to get up. Willard put out a hand to stop him.

"Your chin's bleeding again. Let me look at it."

"It's just a cut."

"No, it looks worse than just a cut. I'll come back with you and tend it. Where do you keep your mediquip?"

As Willard cleaned the gash on his chin, Han reflected that it could be very handy having a Mayon native along when one got into a fight. First aid seemed to be a requirement for citizenship; or else they absorbed the abilities just by being around all those healers.

Willard snapped a pre-measured antiseptic applicator free of a steritube. A quick squeeze forced the pain-killer through the stem of the applicator, into the finely pointed tip. Pricking the numbing fluid into the area around the wound, he commented, "You realize, of course, I can't pay you for this trip. I have a feeling my account's been appropriated."

"You said it, Commander. This evens us up."

"Still, I'd like to offer some recompense."

"Sure. Feel free to," Han quickly agreed. "You've got a point, too, considering what will happen to me if they ever make the connection between your escape and my lift-off. OW!"

"Hold still." Willard examined the bandaging job critically. "This connective cream of yours is old. If you don't see a healer downplanet, you'll have a scar."

"Got plenty elsewhere, Commander. How're you going to get me past Rynan regs?"

Putting the mediquip away, Willard explained. And explained. By the time the *Falcon* came up on Rynan, Willard found he had given the young Independent more information on how to slip by Port rules, how to take advantage of non-specific regulations, and how to forge certain Imperial papers than any Pirate twice his age would know. Still, Willard didn't begrudge Han *the data*; he had been pleasantly surprised by the boy's intelligence and had enjoyed the creativity suggested by Han's excellent questions.

He had to admit, too, that throughout the fatal afternoon's events, he had found himself siding with Solo. All that had happened simply confirmed his hunch. Solo might not be legitimate,

might be all the title, Corellian Pirate, implied, but he was ethical in his own peculiar way. The Maian thought back on the rebel woman's words, "The two brothers are often sundered". She was right.

Solo was still asking questions. "But if I had to blast free, under warrant, and took part of the hangar with me..."

Willard looked sternly at Han. "I think I've paid my passage, Captain. Some things you'll just have to figure out for yourself."

Grinning, Han sat back. "Well, you can't blame me for trying."

Mayon, 6096 Holiday Week, 1st day

"What do you mean the files are empty?!"

In centerport, at Port Mayon Complex, Colonel Veron Hudt found his Year's End ruined by the puzzle of Commander Willard's missing safefiles. He was thoroughly confused by developments, and frightened of the consequences. Willard's disappearance was enough to break him in the service; the lacking files guaranteed a more serious inquiry. And Carlyn Brun was still missing. Were she and Willard in this together? The colonel began to find the presence of his aide stifling: Jacksen was too cool, too calm; and he had answered Hudt's question with only an indifferent shrug.

Turning away from the younger man, the IEB commander stared out the office window. Below, the business streets were deserted except for an occasional couple or group of celebrants wandering through town after a night spent carousing through downport. Colonel Veron Hudt watched a pair of avians toast each other. He thought of his superiors' displeasure, of Jacksen's friends among the Sith, and wondered if he would live to toast the coming year too.

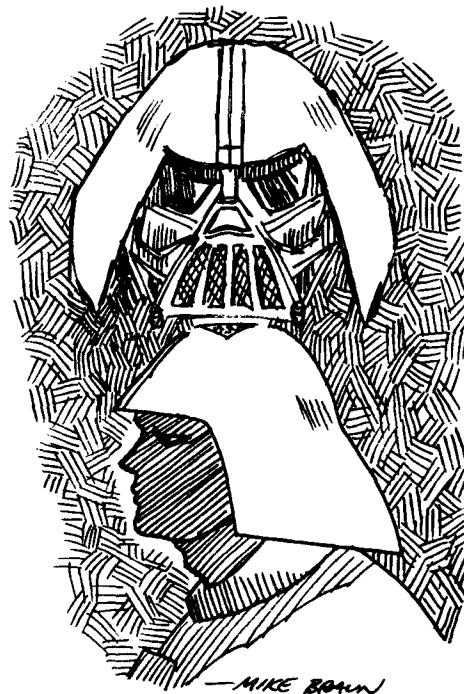
"What the hell is this?! We're not getting paid?!"

However belligerent QenTreveno sounded, he made no move toward the Sith who, having delivered his message quickly and simply, was walking toward the door. Manac was not LyTron; there was more than simple physical danger implied in his manner. Even Get was subdued in the Sith's presence, his eyes dropped and bashful, the power that hovered about his own broad shoulders seemingly insignificant next to Manac's.

Vader's aide paused. His black uniform cape swirled once about him as he faced the Corellian. He said nothing at first, gazing steadily at Qen, then at Get. When it was clear neither man would object further, Manac spoke quietly, dispassion-

ately.

"I will explain only once. You gambled; you lost. It is of little interest to me whether you consider this arrangement unfair. I would, if I were you, be content that the cargo arrived safely. If it had not, you would be dead."



Manac left. Anger and frustration coursed through Qen, bringing a flush to his cheeks. He was helpless before someone such as Manac, and as much as he wished to curse Get for connecting them to the Sith in the first place, he didn't.

"Solo," he said instead to his partner, "Solo dies." Qen closed his fist slowly and stared at his white, taunt fingers. "If I have to do it by hand, Get, I swear it."

5

Rynan, 6906 Holiday Week, 2nd day

Han's doubts about Willard's ability to land the *Faloon* once they made Rynan were unnecessary. He handled most of the landing maneuvers himself

since Willard was busy on the comlink, explaining to the local centroller why the Ryllan should not call the Port Guards, or anyone else, down on the ship or her captain. The centroller finally yielded to Willard's rank, but the Maian knew that a number of surprised and puzzled officials would soon be called away from their Holiday vacations to meet and question the Port Mayon Commander about his surprise visit.

However, Willard did not plan to wait for them to appear. Ryman was one of the leading entertainment and resort planets in the galaxy; losing himself among the revellers would be easy. Especially since the *Falcon*'s hangar - the only one available, and only because of Willard's presence - was so far downport and so buried behind current renovations that the welcome party would take quite a while to find its way there.

"Han, there's one more thing you could, must, do."

Halfway down the corridor to the hatchway, Solo stopped to eye his passenger. Now that he was safely on Ryman, Han was anxious to rid himself of the Maian. The man was a liability and he still had to find someone who might want to go to Ustella with him. New Year's had started and though Ryman was a fun place, Ustella was where Han's friends would be. "What?" he asked impatiently.

"Um, there's still bound to be some questions from the locals. You have to stay put till I make sure everything is clear; port commanders aren't omnipotent, you know."

Han did not appear interested in staying. Willard took a deep breath and carried on. He wasn't very good at lying. "Han, wait for my signal, please? I'll let you know when it's safe."

"What kind of signal?"

"I don't know! I'll make it obvious, believe me."

Maintaining a non-committal attitude, Han continued to walk toward the hatch. Willard began to worry. He had to have Han available to leave, just in case. No other ships would be departing Ryman soon. *No one* left this delightful world during Holiday.

Willard looked at the hatchway and thought of what might be waiting outside. Rebels? Storm-troopers? He knew there would be troopers stationed here despite Ryman's protests. Could they know already, could they be waiting...*Damn, you're panicking again, Nik. The Empire is amazingly stupid on some matters. Remember that.*

"Han, one more favor. This one I'll pay cash for. I do still have my wallet."

"For Deber's sake -- what?"

"I need a side arm. Nothing big, a stunner 'jack' will do. Have you got one you could sell me?"

"Yeah. Do you know how to use one?"

Willard nodded. With a resigned look, Han went searching for the weapon. He came back with a black, Deseratine-style jack. The gun was designed to fit the elongated, sucker-tipped hands of Deseret's reptillian inhabitants, but a human could still handle it. Willard hefted it, then examined the warped ripples on the canister hold.

"I bet that hurt," he said, pointing at the impact waves.

Han chuckled. "Yeah, the Greenback thought so. I always have had a pretty good aim. Now, watch for this..."

The explanation of the stunner's weak points took longer than how to use it. Finally, Solo handed it back to Willard.

"So," the older man said as he took a practice aim, "short range accurate to two meters?"

"That's close."

"It'll do."

Willard turned toward Han and pulled the trigger. Solo, who was far less than two meters from the Maian, gasped in surprise, then fell against the corridor side and slid to the floor.

Without artificial stimulation, Han's stunned state would last a measure at least. Long enough for Willard to decide whether he would stay on Ryman or leave. If he had to go, well, Ustella was an appropriate place for starting the life of a renegade and just a stop or two away from Alderaan. If he decided to stay, Han would wake, curse him royally, then find a new co-pilot. *Anything can still happen*, Willard thought as he bent over to lift Han's inert body. Just knowing the *Falcon* would be available for another measure or more contributed some small comfort to a day of unsettling uncertainties.

He hoped the boy would understand.

Willard dragged Han to the hatchdoor and left him lying by the opening. Hiding the stunner in his wrap'round, Willard left the *Falcon*. Halfway through the hangar entry, the Maian heard someone call his name. He didn't stop. A quick detour behind some construction supplies brought him to the edge of a busy street. All the city streets seemed to be full of beings celebrating the holiday. Tropical flowers cascaded down the sides of buildings, down information posts, down the backs of Ryllans born of a dozen races. The crowds were dancing to the music of mobile bands, or gathering around foodstuff vendors, or just passing in happy bands, traveling from one party to another. No one paid attention to anyone other than to wish a happy new year, and Nik Willard, ex-Commander of Port Mayon, fugitive, found it easy to disappear among the colorful revellers.

"Nik Willard?" The woman's voice was cool and

familiar. She wore no hood this time, just the casual loose dress common to Rynan's natives. Willard continued walking, knowing she would step in beside him. "You should have waited at the hangar, Commander. Rylla Port is not controlled by the Imperials. At least you could have stopped when our messenger called out to you."

"He could have been anybody."

"True. Have you come to Rynan to join us, or just to escape?"

"I don't know yet. I'm new at thinking of myself as a crazy fool."

The woman laughed. "We don't think of you as such. Fools don't think clearly enough to set in motion as many alternate plans of escape as you have...or did we misinterpret some of those gambits you used in getting that Corellian's ship safely in Port?"

"Where would you take me if I said I was interested?"

"Right now? To the government offices. They're empty now that Holiday's started."

Willard tensed at the mention of the government and stared at the woman coldly.

A sad look crossed her face. "How little you know of the Alliance, Commander. This is not Mayon. Our government stands free of Imperial domination. You will be safe there. The Emperor - ah, let us say the *Empire*, since it is growing difficult to keep track of the emperors, cannot afford to lose the Academy or ignite the loyalties of the thousands of citizens who attended its schools in the past. We do not taunt Imperial forces, but neither do we bend to them. Surely you have heard of our Senator Faffston?"

"I have," Willard conceded. "Though I've never met him. Perhaps I've been a bit too cautious with my politics."

"Many people are. Shall we go?"

A nearby storefront, a name on its sign, caught Willard's eye. He would not need the *Falcon* any longer. "Just a moment. I have a favor to pay off." He disappeared into the store.

"You have amazing acquaintances, Commander," the Rynan commented when Willard emerged. "That Ustellan is one of the best sources of underworld information around."

"I kicked her off Mayon once."

"Oh, I see."

"I still don't see your point in recruiting me. I've never considered myself an activist."

"We know you're not. We have plenty of those, Commander. But you are a man of principle, who has proven his integrity over and over through the years. We need practical people, too; a rebellion cannot succeed on mere idealism. Too many worlds

have the wrong impression of the galactic government and our resistance efforts. They believe the Empire will soften one day and revert to the ways of the old Republic. They are ignorant of the ambitions and powers of men such as Warlen Dahke, Lex Tarken, Darth Vader. Our Alliance is presented to them by Imperial lies as nothing more than a small band of dreamy fanatics, or, worse, the casual dabbling in politics by the elite such as our Faffston, and the Organas of Alderaan. If officials like yourself have similar misconceptions, imagine our task in persuading the commonfolk.

"We need you, and others like yourself, to make this battle real to all peoples of the galaxy." She paused, suddenly, as if remembering something, some question for which she feared she already knew the answer. "You came alone?"

Her implication was obvious.

"Yes," Willard answered softly. "They took Pat. There was nothing I could do but run."

The Ryllan nodded. "They are slowly taking everything."

When Solo awoke, the corridor lights were out and he lay in a pool of darkness. With a curse directed at Willard and all hangarhacks from shipmonkeys to port commanders, Han began to sit up. He shook his head groggily as he tried to refocus his eyesight - *Damn, but that little jack is powerful!* - but when a large, soft hand took him by the elbow to help him to his feet, Han became fully awake.

Taking a first good look about him, Han realized Willard hadn't cut the ship's lights after all. He had simply been lying in the shadow of a wookiee.

The giant furry anthropoid tilted its head in a gesture of curiosity when Han pulled his elbow away and sat back against the corridor wall to stare.

A wookiee? Solo was puzzled and a bit wary. He knew something about handling the creatures, having served with one on Pekin...The momentary flame of an old anger lit within Han then, but he dismissed the feeling as pointless. Better to remember what he had picked up there and forget the rest.

And what he had learned was that the key to handling these anthropoids was attitude, both the human's and the wookiee's.

Why would a wookiee come on board a human's ship voluntarily? Han wondered. *I wouldn't've if I were him.* Though Han was aware of Rynan's status as a haven for escaped wookiee slaves, he also knew wise wookiees did not seek human company, especially in the downside of a port. Most starhoppers regarded the jungle creatures as little more than intelligent animals and would either take advantage of them, or, given the opportunity, sell them to a slaver with enough money to overcome their scruples.

Han's sympathies were with the wookiees. He

knew they weren't stupid. And he had been a slave once, too. Solo eyed the visitor a moment. Wookiees, particularly escaped slaves, were touchy creatures: practical cowards, eager to avoid harm or punishment, yet powerful when finally aroused. Han recalled his last visit to a pleasure complex in the Hoh system. One of the establishment's bouncers had been a wookiee and had quite effectively bounced Solo four meters away from the place. *And that had been a female!* Han noted. *From the looks of this one's build and the way it squats...Uh-oh, boy, take it easy. This one's male.* A thought out of the past which the wookiee's presence had revived came to mind. *As long as no overt threats are made and an air of command is maintained, a person can remain in control of any confrontation with a wookiee.* Han scowled slightly. He could still hear his old master's condescending voice in those words; the memory irritated him.

But the advice was good. "All right," Han said commandingly, but not too threateningly, "who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing on my ship?"

The wookiee extended his hand again. Solo accepted it this time and stood as the stranger answered in a rumbling language that sounded to the human ear like a cross between growls and coughs.

Han understood him well enough. He had had to hear Kazeel on Pekin to survive, an incentive which had greatly enhanced his native ability with languages. Still, he was grateful this wookiee enunciated exceptionally well.

So someone's spreading the word that I'm looking for a co-pilot, Solo translated. That has to be Willard; maybe the guy's doing his best to help after all, even if he's doing a class one amateur job of it. "Ace captain", huh? Well, at least he's not a piker. But if this wookiee thinks I'll buy his being a co-pilot...

"Yeah," Han answered, "I'm looking for a pilot. Ah, what's your name?"

Chewbacca, the wookiee answered, looking a bit surprised. He apparently had not expected to be able to carry on a conversation with the human. *Where'd you learn to hear Kazeel?* he asked suspiciously.

Solo grinned. "Oh," he said with an air of casual superiority, "I've been around."

Where?! Chewbacca barked harshly. Curling his lips back to display rows of sharp teeth, the huge creature leaned forward, looming menacingly over Solo.

Han's grin disappeared. He reconsidered. *This is definitely not one of your more docile wookiees...* Solo gave Chewbacca a longer, more critical examination.

Was it possible the creature was one of the rare, never-enslaved wookiees? Han had heard that such existed, yet his experience made him scoff at the idea; he simply couldn't imagine a wookiee ever leaving his home planet voluntarily. No, Han

thought as he reassessed the situation, *he's too well-groomed, and he's had some education.* Solo eyed the bandolier across the wookiee's chest and the crossbow gripped in the huge left hand. *Free agent, Han decided. An escaped slave, sure, but on his own a long time - and armed to make sure he stays that way. Time to tread carefully, boy. Slow and easy.*

"On Pekin," Han replied quietly.

Chewbacca roared in anger at the mention of the notorious slave world. He raised his crossbow and stepped back, his voice thundering in the Falcon's corridor.

Without thinking, Han slapped the crossbow away and yelled back just as furiously, "When I was a slave there, dammit! When I was a slave!"

The wookiee froze, his expression betraying his amazement at Solo's aggression as much as his curiosity at this new information.

Han took advantage of the hesitation to repeat, "I was a slave on Pekin, not a master!" As he spoke, he allowed his feelings on the subject to burn brightly in his eyes. The revelation lasted only a moment, but the meaning of its intensity was not lost on the wookiee. Chewbacca lowered the crossbow and let his shoulders drop.

Taking a deep breath, Han relaxed a bit. Having neutralized the special tension that usually existed between human and wookiee, Solo felt secure enough to return to his more natural attitude with strangers, particularly strangers with ridiculous claims.

"So you are a pilot, are you?" Han commented skeptically. "Just how much, ah, experience do you have, Chewbacca?"

Chewbacca, the wookiee corrected.

"Chewbacca."

Chewbacca.

"Look, how much experience?!"

Chewbacca grumbled. Looking aside as if to give himself time to gather some patience, he rumbled some native deprecation.

"What did you say?!" Han challenged.

The wookiee ignored the comment. He cocked his head regarded Han coolly. *I've been flying, oh, seventy repyears. Off and on.*

"Huh?!"

Chewbacca smiled, pleased with Solo's surprise. *I can fly anything,* he added confidently.

Han snorted. His opinion of that claim was left unsaid, though; the wookiee's temper precluded such an indulgence. Besides, Han decided, better to let him make a fool out of himself. Solo gestured down the corridor toward the Falcon's cockpit. "If you don't mind, I'll test you out right

now. I'm in kind of a hurry to get to Ustella, y'see, and I don't like wasting time."

The wookiee scowled slightly, then sniffed and strode with great dignity down the hall. Han watched him walk away, then shook his head in disbelief as he followed the tall, hairy figure.

First Willard, then this! What next?

Willard had been talking with members of Rynan's Alliance cell for nearly a quarter-measure when Senator Faffston, still dressed in Holiday attire, joined the small meeting.

Tall, svelte, with a long, sensuous face framed by a full, thick backsweep of greying hair, Nolec Faffston was a commanding figure wherever he appeared. His power in the Imperial Senate was irrefutable; his supporters were widespread and loyal. Responsibilities to Rynan and the Academy precluded any openly militant support of the rebel Alliance; such activity he left to Bail Organa and the Alderaani lobby. But his sympathies were known and his interest lent the rebellion the credibility it so badly needed among those who would deplore Organa's outspoken hostility as foolish, and those who claimed they did not have time for childish fancies.

Faffston knew Nik Willard had been one of the latter. He timed his entrance late enough to guarantee that Willard would still be overwhelmed by the information the Alliance cell members were giving him - data the Empire had never admitted - yet early enough to forestall the expert manager's eye from noticing how fragile much of the rebellion's physical support actually was.

Willard, as a man, did not disappoint the Senator. The Maian's questions were concise, pinpointing several weaknesses and shortcomings quickly, but when the rebels present admitted defeat in those areas, Willard automatically began to answer his own queries with his own practical ideas.

Yes, the Commander will do, Faffston thought as he listened to a young rebel, Myek Bocel, quiz the Maian on trade routes and Imperial checkpoint procedures. People such as Nik Willard will never found a movement, but once a working (well, somewhat working) structure can be provided on which to hang their personal beliefs, they will meld with the forces already set in motion. They will be the framework upon which our dream will grow.

When Faffston heard Willard laugh and say it would take all night to even begin to explain Imperial logic, the Senator interrupted gracefully.

"Commander? We'll give you every night you need. Please, consider Rynan your home now. I'm quite certain your knowledge of Imperial ports will keep Myek alone enthralled for weeks. Perhaps, now, his supplies operation will run more smoothly."

"Senator," Willard said with a laugh that told Faffston the Maian was at ease, "I wish you could employ some of the smugglers I've dealt with at

Port Mayon. Regulations don't stop them for long, and they could teach you ways of evading Imperial cruisers and customships that I couldn't invent in a lifetime. Speaking of smugglers..." Willard paused. "Senator? The Corellian who brought me here - well, landing here destroyed some rather ingenious cover work of his, and since I guaranteed him immunity..." The commander let the sentence fade with a shrug.

Faffston turned to one of the rebels present. "Doeg?"

Doeg Linquis, whose casually fastened tunic bore the emblem of Rylla Port Authority, half-smiled. "We haven't touched him, Nolec. I wasn't planning to, either, as long as he broke port by day's end." The Port Guard captain shook his head. "I'd sure like to know how he tripped up our sector registry, though. A trick like that would be handy for Myek's freighters."

"Handy?!" Bocel exclaimed. "If I could figure out how to switch numbers like that, I wouldn't be turning grey at twenty-five! I still think he had inside help."

As Bocel and Doeg argued the point a while, Faffston turned back to Willard. "Commander, the wiles of a smuggler *would* be a valuable resource. Do you think we could recruit this Corellian of yours? Could we trust him?" Faffston reached over to a side table to pour himself a glass of water. "Tell me, Commander, can *you* trust him to keep silent about what has happened today?"

"Oh, I trust him, all right," Willard laughed.

Faffston raised an eyebrow in surprise, yet the Maian's humor was reassuring. The senator drank his water and dismissed one more worry he had had since hearing of Willard's surprise appearance in Rylla. He knew the Port Mayon Commander was a cautious man; he had encouraged Willard's recruitment for that, as well as for the other, obvious, reasons. *If Nik Willard is not worried, Faffston decided, then neither shall I be. Whatever his means of transportation.*

"And you could trust him, too," Willard assured the group, "if you contracted with him. If you could. But I don't think he'd bite. You know how obtuse Corell is, Senator. As a Corellian Pirate - ah, I mean a Corellian Independent..."

"There's a difference?" Doeg interrupted. "I haven't noticed."

"Neither have I," Willard chuckled, "but he seems to think there is."

"Don't they all?"

The Maian continued. "And as such, he's worse. You'll never find a more apolitical group of spacers anywhere. Corellians don't trust any organizations, or any set of rules other than their own. You could buy Han's time and his silence all right, but not his loyalty." Willard paused. "Listen to me!" He glanced at Doeg a bit guiltily. "Two days ago I was ready to lock him away, and now..."

"I'd think Corellians, *any* spacebound trader, would hate the Empire as much as we do," Myek declared.

Willard looked at the young rebel in surprise. "I imagine they do, young man, but Corellian Independents hate *every* government. And I don't think you'd be happy with the way I heard Solo describe your rebellion. 'Space crazies' was one of the milder terms."

Myek reacted to the phrase with a laugh. He reached for the water pitcher, then stopped. Glancing quickly at Faffston, he turned back to Willard, his expression eager and touched with just the slightest hint of craftiness.

"Commander," Myek ventured, "I have a delivery, a very important cargo, that has to be made within eleven reppdays. The carrier has to be beyond suspicion as a rebel. Would your apolitical Corellian take the job if he didn't know it had anything to do with the Alliance?"

Faffston guessed Bocel's gambit immediately, and approved. When Bocel leaned forward, disguising another quick look at the senator with the movements, Faffston sipped from his glass, nodding a go-ahead signal to Myek as he did so.

"Commander," Bocel added, his attention and that of the whole group now focused on Willard only, "would the Corellian take the job - without questions - if he thought *you* were the supplier?"

So, this is it, Willard thought. The pleasant game of problem-solving has turned serious at last. Deftly, and with a surprising simplicity, Bocel had brought the discussion to the point Willard had known it must come to eventually. The question of his complicity with the rebellion had been settled when he had allowed the rebel woman to bring him to this anteroom within the government offices; now only the degree of his involvement had to be settled.

He could ask that they find another way to hire Han, thereby indicating he wished to be no more than a sympathetic source of information. They would accept that, Willard told himself. They're not wide-eyed radicals; they understand a person's needs to set his own limits.

But the idea seemed - Willard searched for the right word to define his feeling. *Cowardly*. That was it. *Mercenary, too, just to take their help and run.*

The other alternative, though, was to accept the responsibility for "a very important cargo" being sent, most likely Willard knew, to the rebels' secret base. That, and the question he had been asked, told Willard they expected his involvement to be at levels of command. The thought frightened him.

Willard noticed the silence in the room and felt the attention which was concentrated on him. "If you paid Han well enough," he answered in a

quiet voice, "he would do it."

"With no questions?" Bocel repeated.

"If my name were on the order - yes."

Senator Faffston leaned forward with the question Willard knew had to follow. The Ryllan spoke in a voice as soft as the Maian's, "*Will* you sign your name to such an Alliance order, Commander Willard?"

How undramatic, Willard thought in mockery of his own anticipations. He had expected a formal appeal to his known sympathies, or some impassioned speech declaring the justness of their goals and insisting upon Willard's involvement. Instead, the moment of decision had been cast upon him quietly, almost as an afterthought of the youngest member of the group. Still, that a renowned man such as Faffston allowed a supplier to usurp what, politically, was his role, appealed to Willard. That fact, and so many other things about the group - their level-headed approach to problems, their ease with one another, their unobtrusive beliefs which seemed so similar to his own - began to dull the worries that drifted through his mind.

They are everything I've complained the Empire isn't, and yet...

Willard found himself staring at Bocel. The young rebel didn't seem to mind. Myek smiled slightly; the expression complemented the Ryllan's confidence while betraying his delight with the success of his maneuvering.

He looks like Solo, Willard thought suddenly, when he smiles like that. He's got the same cocksure attitude and easiness, only...The Maian concentrated on what made Bocel different from the Corellian. He's more civilized, Willard decided, not so tarnished. Quick, but not flippant. Alike, yet...Even if the Republic still ruled, Solo would still be a pirate, but were times different... Willard allowed himself to imagine another reality, another time in which the ruggedly handsome young man before him would not be employing his talents smuggling goods and guns to some far-off rebel station, or merely dreaming of a government to serve honorably. Bocel would be in that government, or be a young officer in a free Star Fleet. Willard could see Myek standing tall on the bridge of his first command ship; he could feel the pride, the satisfaction, the boy would know in that other reality. He kept the image a bit longer and the Ryllan's features shifted. The blond hair darkened, the grey eyes deepened into blue, the home insignia on his shoulder changed, and Nik Willard saw himself, young free, with hope for the future shining in his eyes as clearly as it did in Myek Bocel's, standing on the bridge of the *RSC Corona* as he, too, prepared for a war he believed just.

"Commander?" Faffston's voice prodded gently. "The choice *is* yours."

The long-past figure in Republic blues faded. Willard's focus came back and he looked around him slowly, examining the faces of the rebels who waited. *How different am I from these rebels after all?* The years of struggle within the Empire

drifted by him, through all the Imperial orders read and ignored, past all the frustrations born in freedom's loss, bringing him at last to the events of the past few days and to the anteroom on Rynan. Days when he had openly defied his superiors were clean in his memory; incidents which he had handled by the rules of the old order stood out like beacons in a long night's fog. *I always dismissed the Alliance as an illusionist's fancy, a silly whill-tale, and yet, how unrealistic was I to think my actions alone could make a difference? When the day came that I reached too deeply into Imperial intrigues, they eliminated me. All your life you may live by the Words of Honor and in the end, your contribution? Nothing.*

In the end - nothing. A new image formed before Willard's sight. He shut his eyes, but Pat, as he last remembered her, followed his retreat, and he realized he would never be able to hide from the memory. If I had listened to this rebel woman here, if I had just once thought through everything I said I believed in, I would have let them help me. Pat would be free...Willard could not let himself think that his sister might be dead...and here today.

Willard opened his eyes. *For Pat then. This may be foolishness, but I'm a fool as much as anyone.* He looked at Senator Faffston.

"Yes," Nik Willard said with a nod. "I'll sign."

Han stared at the ordertape in his hand. He suppressed a temptation to laugh out loud; instead, he smiled slightly and flipped the slim cartridge in the air, catching it with a sharp smack.

I don't know how I do it, he thought in satisfaction, but I'm very, very good at it nevertheless.

In fact, after the events of the last few days, the Corellian felt that even the most hardened cynic would have to admit that Han Solo had the magic touch about him. *One day, my ass in a sling over clone drugs; the next, meeting with someone who looks to be the best skyjockey to sit the Falcon's pit since Al left, and I even find myself a payload with which to meet the expenses of the coming Rendezvous. Smart boy, Han Solo; smart and...*

"Can you do the job, Captain?" The insistent and somewhat disbelieving voice of the Ryllan who had delivered that payload disturbed Han's musings.

Solo shifted his weight to one hip, rested his palm on his blaster butt and regarded the blond Ryllan once again. The stranger was tall, well-muscled from what Han decided was experience, not just genes, and dressed in loose hangarhack coveralls. His expression was skeptical; his manner competent. Han did not care for the man's attitude, but he recognized a seasoned spacehand behind the handsome exterior.

And so, although he had already decided to take the man's money and run, Solo was cautious.

"I can do anything I want," he informed the Ryllan. "I just haven't decided whether I want to do business with you yet." Han stepped toward the corridor wall as he talked. "I don't like blind orders, for one thing." Stopping by a wall input which tied into the Falcon's concomp, Han inserted the slim 'tape cartridge and waited for the screen to light.

Nothing happened.

An awkward silence filled the Falcon's hallway. Han scowled at the mechanism; the Ryllan cleared his throat impatiently. Solo reinserted the cartridge. Still nothing happened. The Ryllan's cough turned into a sarcastic chuckle, and even Chewbacca grumbled in exasperation.

Dammit, ship! Han thought angrily as he slammed his fist against the wall by the input. *This is no time to get tempermental! You gotta perform for the marks, else...The screen flickered, then lit dully with the order's specifications. About time, too. Damn, but I gotta fix that one of these -- what the...?!*

Han's frown deepened as he scanned the tape frame a second time. The coordinates made no sense to him. *Who the hell is transferring cargo in that sector? Gods, that's practically out to Dantooine system!* Solo stared at the input screen and thought about the data a moment longer.

"Well?" the Ryllan insisted.

"Damper it!" Han snapped. He turned to face the man once again. "Something very funny is going on here, buddy. I want to know, right now, *who* you are and *what* is in those crates. I've been burned once and I ain't being burned again."

The Ryllan uncrossed his arms and stood very still. "I told you, *no questions*. I meant what I said."

Han's hand rested on his blaster once again, but this time in readiness. "So did I," he replied coldly.

Silence pervaded the freighter corridor as the Ryllan and Corellians stood in challenge.

How much is this job worth?

Han's jaw tightened and he spared an angry glance at the wookiee. *Now is not the time for questions, his glare implied. Silently, he wondered if he hadn't been wrong about the creature's suitability as co-pilot. If he doesn't know when to...*

Chewbacca repeated the question.

The Ryllan looked sharply at the wookiee, then back at Han. To Solo's surprise, the blond hangarhack began to laugh. Crossing his arms, still chuckling at some private joke, the Ryllan nodded at the puzzled Corellian. "The wookiee has a point, Captain. Check out the rest of the tape; I think you'll find all the answers you need there."

Intrigue battled with suspicion within Han.

Slowly, still keeping the Ryllan in sight, Han backed up a step and rechecked the order. He had to scan the next sequence to find the amount, but what he saw there captured his whole attention.

The pay figure itself was not spectacular, just fair; it was the simulsig next to the sum which altered the complexion of this confrontation.

Han read the name a second time. *Willard. Well, it's certainly one way to pay me back*, Solo thought, *but how did he...?* The border guard outside Mayon came back to Han then. He looked sharply at the Ryllan as he recalled what Larex had been looking for: rebels. Rebels and Willard. And "no questions". *Wonderful. How do I get into these things?* Han wondered what was in the crates sitting, waiting in the hangar bay. He decided he didn't want to know. At least it wouldn't be clone chems.

As for what might happen should he get caught with such a cargo...The longer Han thought on that, the more he relaxed. He even smiled slightly at the Ryllan. After all, who would ever suspect a Corellian of running goods for the rebels?

"Willard, huh?" he said at last. "Had a little gig on the side to cover his retirement, did he?"

The rebel covered his surprise well. Still smiling, he shrugged. "He's the boss."

Pretty lame story, Han commented silently, *but what do you expect from a hangarhack? Still, if that's the way they want to play it, I'm game.* "I don't know," he said aloud. "That's pretty far out for that money. I - what?" Han looked at Chewbacca. "What'd you say?"

The wookiee grunted again.

Han shrugged. "Eleven repdays - to sector Dan-eight-oh-six."

This ship could make it in three.

Han's opinion of the wookiee was immediately restored. But there was no need to betray his feelings before they got around to talking money themselves. "Sure it could," he agreed. "What's the worry? You in some kind of rush?"

I want to get off this heap, the wookiee complained. *Fast, too. I owe some money.*

"Really?" Han retrieved the ordertape and stepped toward the Ryllan. To reassure his customer, since the Ryllan obviously heard Kazeel, he added, "That's something to consider, true; but I gotta tell you, I don't like deadbeats."

Chewbacca snorted. *It's just to some Imperial flacks.*

"Oh, well, that's different." Han held the ordertape up, sigpatch facing him. "You got a stylus?" he asked pleasantly. "The sooner we get out of here, the sooner Chewie doesn't have to worry about any Imperials showing up. And if that stuff isn't quite legit, we *don't* want any Imperial

showing up, do we?"

The Ryllan agreed as quickly as Han thought he would.

Chewie?

Han ignored the wookiee's puzzled question and signed the 'tape. He held it out for a countersig, but the rebel hesitated. Han grabbed the man's hand and shoved the tape and stylus into his grip.

"Sign it," Solo ordered, his voice suddenly taut. "Sign it, or I don't fly your stuff. Listen: if I get picked up, I can talk my way outta any hassle if everything looks sweet and legal. But if it don't and I go down, then you go with me 'cause, buddy, my hide comes before your space crazy notions any day. Do you hear me?"

The Ryllan stared at Han for a long time. "But if I sign, we have a deal?"

Han did not take his eyes off the man's. "We do."

Solo read his copyslip of the signatures one more time before filing it in a vest pocket. The rebel had signed nothing more than "Myek", but that would do. A sigscanner would confirm the time of indentation and its uniqueness; Han's imagination could supply the rest of the data.

As for delivery, figuring time off for the Rendezvous, recovery and travel, Han decided eleven repdays were adequate. No trouble at all. He watched Myek disembark. The Ryllan quickly passed on Han's loading instructions to his men and began to work. Solo was grateful for the man's familiarity with freighters; he had no interest in getting any closer to those crates than he had to.

Myek was a cool enough 'hack, too, Solo decided, willing to excuse the Ryllan for his bad manners earlier on grounds of insanity. *Anyone who works for that rebellion is crazy*, Han told himself. *He's cool all right, but definitely crazy.*

Turning to walk back to the cockpit, he remembered the wookiee. "Chewie!" Han said as he enthusiastically slapped the wookiee on the arm. "Come on to the pit; you and me got a lot of talking to do!"

Chewbacca didn't budge. *Chewie?* he asked a second time.

Distracted by the distant sound of the ship's load-lifters being engaged, Han didn't notice the wookiee's intonation. "Yeah, 'Chewie'. Lot easier to say." He urged Chewbacca to follow him. "Come on, I want to monitor the 'hacks."

Chewie?! Chewbacca roared.

Han stepped back, startled. "Well, what the hell else do you want me to call you?" he yelled. "You just about took my head off over 'Chewbacca'! Dammit, if you're gonna fly with me, I gotta call

you something!"

What percentage? Chewbacca asked, suddenly all business.

"Twenty-five per cent of the net."

Too low.

"Too high you mean!"

Option to partner up with percentage retro-active?

"Hell, no!"

It was worth a try. I agree. Is it a deal?

"It's a deal." Han held out his hand, and when Chewbacca extended his, grasped the wookiee's furry wrist firmly in the traditional Corellian gesture of agreement. Chewbacca added a Kazeel howl of acknowledgement.

That accomplished, Han turned toward the cockpit once again. His new co-pilot followed him in silence a moment, then tapped him on the shoulder. Solo leaned against the edge of the pit entry. "Yeah?"

I have a problem, Captain, Chewbacca began slowly. *Those Imperials...*

"Look, if I told that Ryllan he doesn't have to worry, you sure as hell don't have to!"

I know, I know. What I mean is...

"Well?"

Chewbacca shrugged a bit sheepishly. *I lost a lot in that wopen game and...* He gave a fatalistic hoot, then held out a palm. *Captain, can I have an advance on my pay?*

The dining room at Nolec Faffston's oceanside estate was filled with personal friends and Alliance compatriots marking the end of the second day of Holiday. Nik Willard wandered through the crowd, too tired to join any one group of partygoers, but reluctant to excuse himself from his patrons' celebrations. Instead, he passed his time by listening to the music that filled the room, concentrating on the rhythms, trying to put aside thoughts on the consequences of his actions that day.

Myek Bocel's bright and confident laughter caught Willard's attention. The young rebel, with Doeg Linquis at his side, had arrived late and was only now stalking his dinner at the buffet table. Willard quietly joined the group that surrounded Myek, and listened to his account of how he had deftly maneuvered one Corellian Pirate into unwittingly carrying a rebel cargo. Though the story impressed Myek's admirers, Willard had his reservations. He suspected that Han's version of the tale might differ substantially; he knew Solo wasn't that naive. Seeking out the Port Guard cap-

tain, Willard asked about Han's current status.

Doeg looked up for a moment, then continued to pile vegetables on his plate. "The Corellian? Oh, he's gone. Took off as soon as we had loaded. The wookiee fueled up while Bocel's men worked."

Willard frowned. "Wookiee? What wookiee?"

"His co-pilot," Doeg answered. "You know."

Myek overheard and interrupted. "He was just hired, Doeg," Bocel explained, then turned to Willard. "You should have heard them, Commander! What a pair. Wait till Solo finds out how much the wookiee gambles! I've heard about that Chewbacca; he can fly like a Corellian, but he's loose as a Kressano pleasure slave at a gaming board!"

Well, Willard thought, that wasn't quite what I had expected to turn up for Han, but if he's happy...At least the wookiee's habits sound made-to-order for the boy's line of business.

Bocel began to repeat his story for some new friends. Willard excused himself and walked thoughtfully toward a patio. *Han's on his way; the last piece of business is done. It's over.*

Closing the patio doors, Willard left the noise of the party behind him. Outside, Rynan's sun shone brightly, hung in an eternal noontide over the planet whose rotation had stopped millennia ago; even the fires of the galactic center which the system bordered were invisible.

What a loss to have no night here, Willard thought as he gazed at the tropical ocean. He wondered if the skies were clear enough over Port Mayon for the glories of the Center to shine through this Holiday. He would miss seeing the galactic way overhead.

Pat enjoyed watching the stars at night, too.

Willard bowed his head. No matter where he sent his thoughts, they came swirling back to reality. He was a rebel. He had lost his sister. There was no turning back. His life had been changed - forever.

Forever. The word still made his heart pound harder. *Pat's gone - forever. Mayon's gone - forever.* Willard recalled Faffston's conversation with him as they walked to the estate. "Someday," the senator had said, "when all is finished and if we are successful, we will return to our homes at last; we will know peace." The comment was meant to be consoling, but deep within himself, Willard knew the words were not for him. That part of his life was over; he would never see home again.

He took a deep breath and lifted his eyes once again to the horizon. There, beyond Rynan's sun, shone the galaxy in all its heartless beauty. There were those who, like the old Jedi, believed in a universal consciousness which, despite the cruelty of life, ultimately supported life. Willard did not think he knew what to believe. He was simply lonely this evening, however friendly the festivities. Lonely, tired and just as confused about the purpose of life as he had been as a

young man living through the Clone Wars, or as a newly-named Port Commander watching the Republic fall before Imperial greed.

And yet, there must be a purpose to it all, or else I never would have believed enough to be here now.

And I am here - forever.

EPILOGUE

Yavin 4, 6102

He had meant to say hello to Solo, to tease him about being involved with rebels once again, but Leia came running up to him and Nik Willard forgot about the Corellian in his concern for the young Alderaani princess.

She was dirty and a trifle pale, but seemed unharmed. Willard held out his arms and clasped her gently. He wanted her to know he understood how it felt to be alone in the universe.

But she had no time for condolences, and spoke only of her droid, of computer printouts and battle plans.

No time. No, there is never enough time for the important things, Willard thought as he led her away. Neither for grief nor hesitation. Not for a rebel.

~~~~~

Han eyed Willard speculatively as he stepped off the supplies speeder. For a moment, he thought the old commander recognized him, but the Maian seemed to have eyes for Leia only. That was okay by Han.

*You know, if I believed in fate...Han dismissed the thought. His problem was he was a sucker for someone with a curious story, and that*

eccentricity had gotten him into the damndest...

"Come on, Han. Let's go!" The kid sounded absolutely ecstatic to be here. "Hey, I bet you'll change your ideas about the rebellion after you talk to the people here!"

Solo stared at the Tatooiner in honest horror. Gods! The kid was sizing him up for a uniform already! At least Willard had had the decency to get him another job and to leave him alone. And no questions asked. "Look, kid," Han said severely, "I ain't a rebel. I pawned my idealism on a good sense of survival a long time ago. It'll be a whole lot easier on both of us, especially me, if you just drop any ideas you might have about dragging me any further into this insanity."

Luke Skywalker was undaunted by Han's rejection. "Hey, I was a little reluctant, too, when Ben asked me to go to Alderaan," he offered helpfully. "It's natural."

"Kid, *nothing* about this charter has been natural. And 'reluctant' ain't half the word for how I feel. But, go on, have your fun. Me 'n Chewie'll hang around till they pay us. We'll be sure to say goodbye."

Skywalker made a face of impatience, then shook his head and hurried after Willard and Leia. His Corellian friend crossed his arms and gave the temple hangar a critical survey.

How *did* he get into these messes? "*I would exercise a bit more discretion...*" The memory of Willard's advice and the irony of it did not amuse Han at this particular moment. *No more passengers*, the Corellian told himself. *Definitely.*

Han scowled as he watched two technicians work on a Y-wing. The stripped-down ship made the *Falcon* look like a luxury yacht. *Kid's a damn fool if he lets them put him in one of those*, Solo thought critically. *Sheer suicide.*

Next to him, Chewbacca rumbled a question.

"No, I am *not* going with Luke to meet all the Princess' friends." Han uncrossed his arms, leaned against the wookiee and continued to watch the Y-wing repairs.

"It's all a lot of whilltales anyway."



Thanks go to Kim Blekis for the use of "Althea Dareen" as Han's former co-pilot and partner. Al appeared in Kim's "On the Border" in Warped Space 28.

## SILENT MISTRESS

by Ellen L. Kobrin

How quiet the rec room is  
At three o'clock in the morning--  
Or what would be three A.M.  
If we were on a world  
Instead of encased in  
A fragile silver eggshell,  
The shell that is my world.

I enjoy the silence.

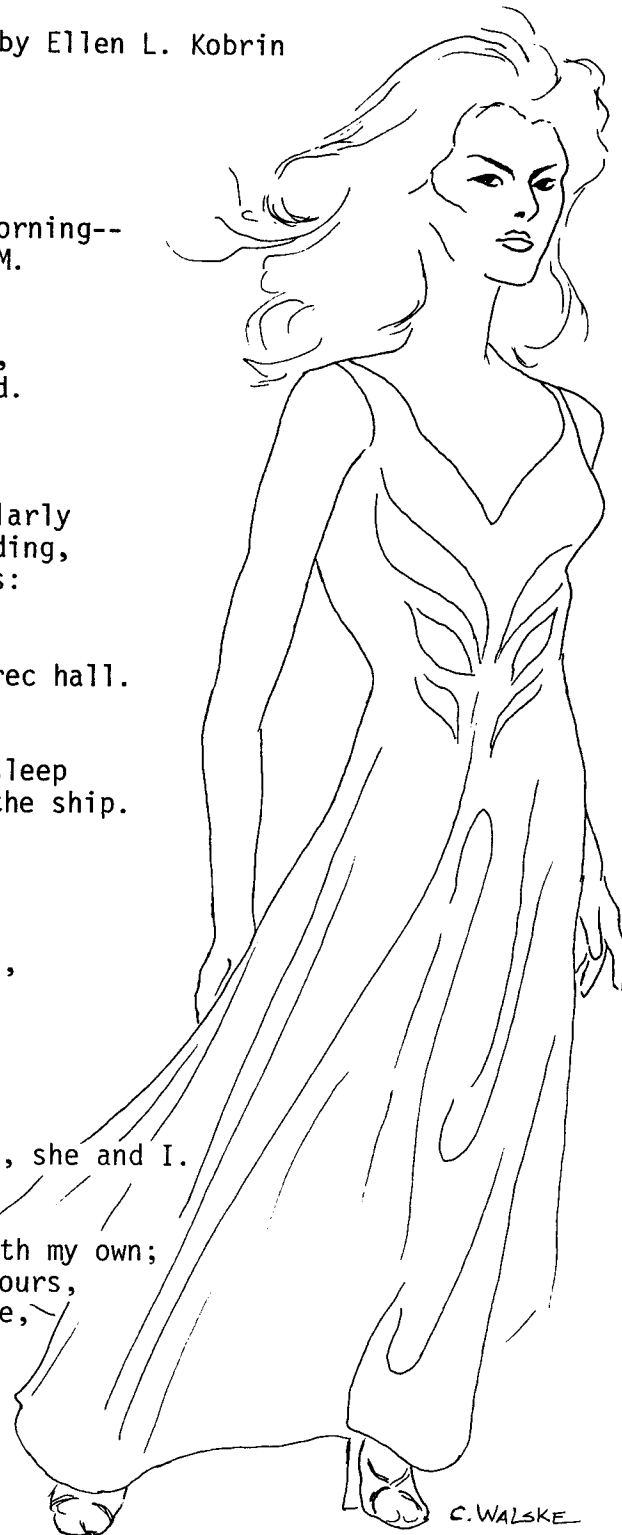
Often, if I don't particularly  
Feel like sleeping or reading,  
I come to the quiet places:  
To the observation deck,  
Or to the science labs,  
Or, like tonight, to the rec hall.  
(Spock says I prowl;  
I guess that's what I do.)  
When most of the crew's asleep  
I somehow feel closer to the ship.

I have her to myself now.

I can feel her Presence  
Surrounding me with warmth,  
Not unlike a woman.  
I can hear her breathe,  
Feel her heart beating  
In rhythm with mine.

We are in silent communion, she and I.

She has her own identity,  
Inextricably interwoven with my own;  
And in these small, dark hours,  
With no one else to intrude,  
I belong to her,  
And she is all mine.





# *Abandon All Hope*

In me the when and then become the now

And blend one into the other,  
Making a mockery of the linearity of time.

My curse is access to the when and wherever;  
Your responsibility, the preservation of the lines of time.

One warning will I give thee. Heed it well.  
Wanderers in time BEWARE!  
No change then is so small that it might not mean the destruction of the now.

Beginnings are endings and endings also beginnings.  
Everywhere there is evidence of the complexity of time.  
Given the temptation to meddle, to  
Interfere, to make changes, do not yield! It is a trap.  
Now will be made better for it is always the belief.  
Now will be made far worse is more oftentimes the truth.  
Interference breeds more interference and destruction. Mark this well:  
Nigh on a thousand civilizations have been destroyed by their desire to play  
God....

*Frances Zawacky*

**For your enjoyment** we hereby present our zine list. Because of the increase in postal rates and the uncertainty of availability, we are not listing any prices. For a SASE, the editors will be glad to furnish the information you request.

*Against the Sith 4* and *Star Journeys*. Nancy and Tracy Duncan; PO Box 2385; Eugene, OR 97402. Back issues may be available. *Star Wars*.

*Alnitah 10*. Send a self-addressed envelope and an International Reply coupon to Margaret Draper; The Lodge, Wantage Road; Rowstock, Didcot; Oxon OX11-0JT; England. Back issues may be available.

*Contact 5*. Planned. Bev Volker & Nancy Kippax; 5657 Utrecht Road; Baltimore, MD 21206.

*Death Dance*. Novel. Pulsar Press; c/o Carol Frisbie; 518 S. Abingdon Street; Arlington, VA 22204.

*Delta Triad 5*. Planned. Melinda Shreve-Reynolds; Annetta Rt., Box 216; Lietchfield, KY 42754.

*The Displaced*. Lois Welling; 1518 Winston Drive; Champaign, IL 61820.

*Echoes From the Past* (current) and *Southern Star 6* (planned). Rebecca Hoffman; 205 Pine Street; Greer, SC 29651.

*Eel Bird Banders' Bulletin 2*. Joyce Yasner; 140 Cadman Plaza West, #21H; Brooklyn, NY 11201.

*Empire Star 1-3* and *Vendetta* and *Solo* (current); *Empire Star 4* (planned). Send a self-addressed envelope and an International Reply Coupon to J.J. Adamson; 33 Whiteley Drive; Trott Park; Adelaide; South Australia 5158.

*Farthest Star 2*. Planned. Pat Nolan; 3284 Hull Avenue; Bronx, NY 10467.

*IDIC 6*. Leslye Lilker; 61 Union Place; Lynbrook, NY 11563. Back issues may be available.

Isis Press offers *Perm Portfolio* (reprint planned), *Time Warp 2* (ST) & *3* (SW), and *Rite of Statement* (letter-zine). Isis Press; c/o Anne Elizabeth Zeek; PO Box 296; Staten Island, NY 10301.

*King Grove*. Send a self-addressed envelope and an International Reply Coupon to Ann Looker; 10 Max Weber Platz; Munich 80; West Germany.

M'Pingo Press offers *Goddess Uhura*, *Captain Uhura* (both novels) and *Probe 12*. M'Pingo Press; c/o Winston Howlett; PO Box 206; New Rochelle, NY 10804.

*Nu Ormenel Collected 1 & 2* (current), *3* (planned). Fern Marder & Carol Walske; 342 East 53rd Street, #4D; New York, NY 10022.

*Odyssey 3*. Ingrid Cross; 3650 Dell Road; Holt, MI 48842.

*Only Stars Can Last* (LP & cassette), *Omicron Ceti Ceti & Friends* (cassette only), and *The Colors of Love* (LP only). Martha Bonds; 5905 Yorkwood Road; Baltimore, MD 21239.

*Other Side of Paradise 4* (planned) and *Time of Surak* (current). Amy Falkowitz; 323 Higdon Avenue, #3; Mountain View, CA 94041.

Poison Pen Press offers *Masiform D 9* and *Spook-analia 1-5*. Devra Langsam; 627 East 8th Street; Brooklyn, NY 11218.

*Rigel 4,5,6,7* (one issue). Carol Ann Lee; 900 Leverton Road; Rockville, MD 20852.

*Skywalker 3*. Beverley Clark; 1950 Cooley Avenue, #5306; Palo Alto, CA 94303. *Star Wars*; back issues may be available.

*Solar Sailors* (LP). Bandersnatchi Press; 2100 N. Halsted, #3F; Chicago, IL 60614.

*Sol Plus 7/8* (planned), and *Mission to Mrinn* (current). Jacqueline Bielowicz; 4677 North Boulder; Tulsa, OK 74126.

*Stardate: Unknown 5*. Gerry Downes; 3925 West 79th; Anchorage, AL 99502.

T'Kuhtian Press offers *Warped Space 41* and *Syndi-zine* (current), and *Obsc'zine 4* and *The Weight Collected* (planned). T'Kuhtian Press; c/o Lori Chapek-Carleton; 5132 Jo-Don Drive; East Lansing, MI 48823. Back issues are available.

Yeoman Press offers *R&R 9 & 10*, *Archives 3 & 4*, and *The Perfect Object* (novel). Yeoman Press; 5465 Valles Avenue; Bronx, NY 10471.

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